



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 8 April 2024

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Speaker:** Members, I have five items to deal with before we start today's business, so I ask that you bear with me.

First, I have written to the Princess of Wales expressing the good wishes of the Assembly following her announcement of her cancer diagnosis. Too many of us know how difficult such matters are for families. We all look forward to the full recovery of the Princess of Wales and hope that she has the time and space to make that recovery. Members will have a chance to express their own good wishes shortly.

Secondly, I have received a letter from Keith Buchanan advising of his resignation as Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee. I have also received correspondence from the DUP's nominating officer advising that Diane Forsythe has been appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee. Those changes took effect on 21 March 2024.

Thirdly, on Tuesday 12 March, Mark Durkan raised a point of order about ministerial responses to questions for written answer, after which I made a ruling setting out the position. I said on that occasion:

*"if there is a question on a matter relating to a Minister's responsibilities, there is a duty on the Minister to provide a full answer to it. It is not in order to avoid answering by advising Members to send an email to someone else instead." — [Official Report (Hansard), 12 March 2024, p32, col 1].*

Subsequently, some Members, including Patsy McGlone, drew to my attention further answers, from a different Minister, that they had received. It is clear that the proper procedural approach is not being followed, despite my ruling. I will therefore be writing to all Ministers about answers to questions for written answer.

Fourthly, a number of Members, including Robbie Butler, have raised issues with me about ministerial announcements being made outside, rather than through statements to, the Assembly. It remains the case that if Ministers have significant announcements to make, they should make them to the Assembly first. There are circumstances in which it is proper and valid for Ministers to use written ministerial statements to inform Members. My general expectation would be that, on sitting days in particular, Ministers bring announcements to the Chamber through an oral statement.

Later, the Assembly will debate a motion on addressing NI Water's challenges. I am aware that yesterday, in anticipation of the debate, the Minister for Infrastructure made an announcement to the media in which he ruled out household water charges.

I think that that is an example of where it would have been more appropriate for the Minister to await business today to make the statement, either in an oral statement or in response to the debate. I have written to Ministers about this issue previously, and I will, again, monitor these issues over the weeks ahead.

Fifthly and finally, on Tuesday 12 March 2024, Colm Gildernew raised a point of order at the conclusion Members' Statements in relation to comments made by Jim Allister about Libraries NI. I informed Mr Gildernew at the time that I had been listening carefully to Mr Allister's contribution, but I have now reviewed the Official Report.

The Assembly's standards of debate expect exchanges between Members to demonstrate courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect. While operating within the confines of those standards, it is also recognised that Members have a legal right to freedom of expression, which means that they may sometimes choose to express their views forcefully and in a manner that others may disagree with. Members are required to exercise care in the language that they use, and we should seek to have civility in our

exchanges and to avoid personal attacks. However, that is not intended to prevent passionate and robust debate, which I encourage. Freedom of expression is an important hallmark of any Chamber, and, in order to ensure full and frank debate on important issues, it must be protected. It is right that that should be recognised in the Chamber, which will take decisions on important matters that impact on the lives of those whom we all represent.

That point was captured in the 'Ten Practical Principles for Debate in the Northern Ireland Assembly', issued by the Speaker's Office earlier in the mandate. It is as follows:

*"In an Assembly of diverse political views, you should accept that points will be made by other Members that you will not agree with, sometimes in terms that you would not use yourself."*

Having reviewed the Official Report, I remain content that nothing disorderly occurred in Mr Allister's remarks. While I accept that Mr Gildernew and, indeed, other Members may have disagreed with Mr Allister's comments or even found them to be offensive, the key point is that the way to challenge those views is during debate. It was not a procedural point for the Chair. I, therefore, want to take this opportunity to remind all Members that points of order should not be abused to respond to views that they disagree with — that is the point of debate. Let us move on.

## Matter of the Day

### Her Royal Highness The Princess of Wales: Cancer Diagnosis

**Mr Speaker:** A Matter of the Day has been requested by Stephen Dunne, and he has been given leave to make a statement on the cancer diagnosis of Her Royal Highness The Princess of Wales 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 who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that interventions are not permitted. I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has concluded.

**Mr Dunne:** I have tabled this Matter of the Day to send our very best wishes to Her Royal Highness The Princess of Wales following her recent cancer diagnosis, which came as a great shock to our nation and right across the world. Since our last sitting, the Princess of Wales, Kate, spoke out incredibly courageously, in a video released on 22 March, to share with the world that she is undergoing cancer treatment after her surgery in January this year. That shook our nation, and we offer our very best wishes to Her Royal Highness for a full and swift recovery.

While it caused great alarm across the nation, we must always remember that there is a very personal side for their young, loving family, who are dealing with the news. I also want to place on record my very best wishes to His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales, William, and to Prince George, Princess Charlotte and Prince Louis as they support Kate through this time of great trial.

The news came as even greater shock as it was just over six weeks from the announcement that King Charles III was also undergoing cancer treatment. It has been a stark reminder to us all of the devastating impact that cancer can have on families. It is encouraging to see how those recent announcements have led to a very significant increase in the number of people coming forward to have their health checked and increasing public awareness of the importance of early detection and diagnosis through cancer support services and our NHS.

Prior to the announcement from the Princess of Wales, there had been intense and often cruel speculation from some media outlets across the

world and on social media. It is imperative that Her Royal Highness is given the space and privacy to recover with her closest family at such a time of trial in her personal life.

On behalf of the people of North Down and the Democratic Unionist Party, I extend my very best wishes to Her Royal Highness The Princess of Wales and the entire royal family at this very difficult time. They will be in our thoughts and prayers in the days ahead, as will all those who continue to fight this terrible disease and illness.

**Ms Eastwood:** I thank Mr Dunne for tabling the Matter of the Day. He is absolutely right: only a few short weeks ago, we were in the Chamber having the exact same conversation about the King. I remember where I was on the Friday that the news broke that the Princess had cancer, and it took my breath away because we do not associate such announcements with those people. They seem, somehow, above it all in a way. We seem to think that those whom we put in those positions will never be impacted by life, but, of course, that is not cancer. Cancer impacts us all.

In the short time available, I want to look at the fact that one in two of us will get cancer in our lifetime. At the minute, we cannot say that our services reflect that demand, and that must change. I also want to draw attention to the work of the Northern Ireland Cancer Charities Coalition, which is doing really important and fantastic work that gives coherence and articulation to that sector.

Only 89% of cancer patients started treatment within 31 days of a decision to treat, when the target is 98%. Only 40% of patients who were urgently referred for breast cancer were seen by a specialist within 14 days, which is nowhere near the target.

No one will disagree with the idea that we should prioritise cancer services and cancer patients. That is just not going to happen; we all know how terrible a disease it is. We must now put that sentiment and those words into action. Health and cancer are completely non-political, and every one of us can agree on that. I look forward to working with every Member in the House to make sure that we never miss those targets again and that we move forward.

We must put more money into funding the treatment of childhood cancers, which are one of the least funded and researched areas of cancer.

**Mr O'Toole:** I pass on my thoughts and those of my party to the princess after the cancer diagnosis that has been made public in the last few weeks. It is, obviously, extremely difficult to be in the public eye in such a high-profile role and face the kind of speculation and lurid reporting that has happened over the last number of months. It is particularly difficult for someone who is relatively young and has a very young family to deal with a cancer diagnosis, which is extraordinarily difficult in itself, and that has been compounded by extraordinary levels of media and public attention. There have been shocking levels of hypocrisy in some of the media coverage of the matter. Some of the people who pursued the story somewhat changed their tune when the difficult news of the diagnosis was made public. That is for those outlets to account for, but they have not done so in the past and they might not do so now.

Suffice it to say that this is a hugely difficult time for the princess. We wish her well not just because of her public role but because she has a very young family. It will be extraordinarily difficult for her to deal with that, but she has our best wishes and, I am sure, those of everybody, as she makes, we hope, a full recovery.

I also endorse the comments just made about the message that the matter sends out about our cancer waiting times. The role that we have as legislators is to back up our words with practical legislative action and financial commitment. We should have clear delivery commitments over the next few years to address our unacceptable cancer waiting times in Northern Ireland. Let that be the practical outworking of what we are talking about today.

**12.15 pm**

**Mr Elliott:** I join the Member in offering my personal support and that of the Ulster Unionist Party to the princess and her wider family. We have heard about the significance of cancer and how it, basically, affects everyone in the community, and I hope that this will help to raise awareness of that. I hope that the princess's coming out will help to raise awareness of that in the way that only someone in her position can do. I look around the Chamber and see people from various parties who have been directly affected and impacted by cancer. Most of us have been impacted, whether directly or indirectly. It is a very serious matter when you first hear that dreadful news. You know that yourself, Mr Speaker

Much of this can be hopeful as well. I pray that it gives hope to the wider community,

particularly those who have cancer, and gives them a level of support. In the meantime, I wish Kate and her family well and encourage them to continually keep the subject on the radar for the wider community.

**Mr Allister:** I join others on my behalf and that of my party and my constituents in North Antrim in offering the best wishes of the Assembly to Her Royal Highness The Princess of Wales. It is always distressing when we hear news of someone who is in this position: battling cancer. Cancer is no respecter of persons — that is abundantly clear — but it is particularly poignant when it strikes a young mother. That strikes a chord with us all.

I trust and pray that the princess will enjoy a full recovery and that, at this difficult time, it is some comfort for her to know that, throughout our nation, there is a huge upswell of best wishes for her and her family. That is in sharp contrast to the spurious and distressing media speculation that was rife in the few weeks before the announcement. Those media outlets need to look at themselves and at how they fuelled groundless speculation and added, no doubt, great distress at a time of particular turmoil in that family. I trust that, on that front too, our media will learn a lesson in respect of this matter.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank Members for their dignified conduct in relation to that issue.

## Members' Statements

### Milltown Cemetery

**Miss McAllister:** I rise to call urgently for a halt to ongoing work at Milltown Cemetery that risks disturbing the burial ground of thousands of babies, including my stillborn brother. It has been known for decades that Bog Meadows, which is at the bottom of Milltown Cemetery, is the resting place of those who were not deemed worthy of a consecrated burial by the Catholic Church. There are an estimated 11,000 bodies on the site, including stillborn babies, people who suffered from mental illness, mothers who died during childbirth and those who could not afford a proper burial.

Amnesty International has stated that hundreds of babies and small infants from mother-and-baby homes and religious-run children's homes are buried in Bog Meadows. I have met those who believe that they have relatives buried in the site, and they remain extremely concerned that a fully transparent analysis of the ground has not taken place to ensure that burial sites are protected from damage. I call on the Catholic Church and the Department for Communities to urgently halt any work to allow for transparent and independent analysis of the ground in question.

Since the story was reported, a number of people have been in touch with me with similar concerns that their relatives may be affected. Families impacted deserve to have confidence that the remains of their loved ones will not be disturbed. I also encourage anyone who has been affected by this or would like help to locate the remains of their loved ones on the site to get in touch.

I am acutely aware of the pain that this may be dredging up for many people and families. I want to assure everyone that I will not let the issue rest. Ultimately, we need to call on the Catholic Church to leave the ground undisturbed and let those who lie there finally rest in peace.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Liz Kimmins. I apologise to Ms Kimmins for not calling her to speak on the Matter of the Day.

### Armagh Ladies Football Team

**Ms Kimmins:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Armagh Ladies on their superb win yesterday against the Kingdom of Kerry in Division 1 of the National League

final. It was their first appearance in a final, and, no doubt, they are the pride of the county. I would safely say that they are the pride of Ulster on their success yesterday. Ladies' football is up on its hind legs, particularly in Armagh. We are delighted with the win that the girls achieved, and we encourage everybody to get behind them and to support ladies' football in the time ahead.

## Brighter Futures

**Mrs Erskine:** Today, I want to bring the Assembly's attention to the loss of a vital autism service, Brighter Futures, in my constituency. It supported children aged 0-12 years presenting with autism. Upwards of 30 families were supported by the project, which was run by the charity Positive Futures. Before Easter, I met a group of parents, along with the CEO of Positive Futures and staff from Brighter Futures. The need for the service was evident, as was the impact that its loss would have on families and, importantly, children. The stories of the impact that the service had in Fermanagh were incredible.

Brighter Futures was originally a five-year project funded by the National Lottery and some Western Health and Social Care Trust funding. The programme finished the five-year cycle in 2022, and I attended the winding-up event. However, fortunately, further money was found by Positive Futures to keep it running for a further two years. That funding stream, like many others in the community and voluntary sector, has dried up. Where does that leave families? It leaves them at breaking point, unable to access in any way the same support through our broken NHS system. Scores of families who have children with autism, ASD and ADHD again have no social worker in place to give them support going forward. It raises the question of how we are in this situation in 2024, because we should support the most vulnerable in society.

The crux of the matter is that Brighter Futures provided a service that was cost-effective and able to provide better outcomes. An independent evaluation of the service completed by Professor Roy McConkey from Ulster University not only evidenced the positive impact of the service but recommended that it should be rolled out across Northern Ireland. We talk of invest-to-save when it comes to our health service: here is a prime example of that, but, without the willingness in Departments to realise this, such services are lost. Today, we are at the end of World Autism Acceptance

Week, and it saddens me that we have failed those people. We need to take a reality check.

Speaking recently about the service to a local newspaper, one parent said that nothing was impossible because Brighter Futures always looked for the possible in everything.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member should bring her remarks to a close, please.

**Mrs Erskine:** I hope that, today, we all take that message on board for the sake of my constituents in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

## County Fermanagh: IRA Victims

**Mr Elliott:** I rise today to note two recent events that I attended two weekends apart. They were to remember two significant people in our community who were murdered by the IRA.

Yesterday, we attended events to remember George Saunderson. He was shot and murdered in the primary school of which he was headmaster, 50 years ago, when three gunmen went into Earl of Erne Primary School at Teemore, outside Derrylin. Three IRA gunmen shot him in front of the cooks and the pupils of that school. It was a despicable act. I was pleased that a huge number of people from across the community gathered yesterday to remember the late George Saunderson. He was a figurehead in the community and a retired Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) officer. He served his country with distinction in the army and fought during the Second World War. To end his life in that way was despicable. Some of his family travelled from Canada to attend the events over the weekend. One of the guns that were used to murder George was sold in America some years later to raise funds for the IRA, and a label was put on it to say that it had been used to murder that school principal who was teaching primary-school children.

Two weeks ago, I attended a memorial service for Ronnie Funston. Ronnie was a farmer on the border at Pettigo. At 8 o'clock one morning, IRA people came from across the border and shot him while he was on his tractor, feeding his livestock. His mother found him dying on the tractor. It meant that the family had to sell their farmlands and leave the area totally. That was another despicable act, carried out by cowards in this society. I knew Ronnie personally; I had talked to him just the week before. I quote his brother:

*"It is something my family ... have had to live with all this time. It was yet another*



*sectarian murder by that organisation that their apologists have tried to portray as something else. Let's not try to make excuses for them: they were and are a nakedly sectarian organisation that continues to hide behind platitudes and sound bites."*

## Political Stability

**Mr O'Toole:** I will touch on a broader political question and simply reflect on the events of the past 10 days. I do not mean the specific, clearly noteworthy and, to many people, shocking news developments — those are now a matter for the legal system, and it is important that none of us gets into speculation as, unfortunately, some have done online — but it is important to reflect on the broader political questions. The political question that I want to reflect on is that, two months in, while we have seen a significant and welcome move towards a constructive and positive tone at the top of the Executive, many of us who believe in reform of the institutions have said all along that one of the reasons why we need reform of the institutions so that parties cannot bring the institutions down is that there is always a new moment of political instability in Northern Ireland.

Some of the commentary in the past little while has been about what the events of the past 10 days that we all know about mean for Stormont and for political stability. That should not be one of the questions that is asked, not because people should not be allowed to talk about the political consequences of high-profile things that are in the news, but because devolved governance simply cannot be placed at risk by even very surprising and shocking things in the news agenda. We need to get to a place where the presence of governance here is taken as a given and where public servants know that their budgets will be set, that decisions will be made and that they can get on with delivering public services without the threat of political instability removing governance in Northern Ireland.

I am not really getting into a specific discussion about any of those matters. They are of interest to the public, but the real, true public interest is in ensuring that we have the continuation of devolution here. I simply wanted to reflect on my concern that one of the first places that we have gone when something has developed in the news is one where we debate political stability and ask, "Will devolution sustain itself?". I hope that it does, and I am assured by some of the comments made by leading parties in the Executive, but the very fact that that is even speculated about concerns me. It makes

the argument for fundamental reform of the institutions so that our institutions are not placed at risk by the news agenda, because there will always be something coming along. Whether that is internally inside political parties, in the news agenda or in the broader diplomatic scene, there will be always be something that comes along that can destabilise.

Destabilisation should never come at the cost of basic governance here and the ability to continue devolution. That is all I want to say today, and I use the opportunity to reflect on that point.

12.30 pm

## Domestic Violence

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I want to raise the issue of an increase in domestic violence. I have been on the record in speaking about this before, most recently around the strategy to end violence against women and girls. In North Belfast, since the end of COVID, there has certainly been a marked increase. It is exclusively women I am talking about. That is not to say that men do not experience domestic violence; it is just that I am talking about my experience in the constituency. For women who cannot get a non-molestation order, for whatever reason, there is a certainly a red flag [*Inaudible*] through the process.

As part of other debates, we had a discussion around funding, particularly for Women's Aid and that, and I think that everybody across the House recognised how important that was. However, there is an underbelly to some of the funding that is awarded to some of the groups, and that is that it is women, particularly in the women's centres and, indeed, the women who volunteer, who are supporting, accompanying and giving bespoke support to women who often find themselves having to get emergency accommodation not only outside their own constituency but outside the city. Women who have children are also navigating their way through social services and then trying to deal with the trauma of experiencing domestic violence.

I will pursue this because, at the minute, funding is across at least three Departments, and women on the ground and their families are facing a negative impact as a result. We need a bespoke service. We need to look at the examples shown by the Grace Family Centre in north Belfast, the Falls Women's Centre in west Belfast and other women's centres to see the networks and try to give them support, because it is absolutely disgraceful that, in 2024, children

have been lifted from their beds in the early hours and bundled into cars wrapped in quilts, and the support that they get afterwards is absolutely an uphill climb. That is something that none of us are happy to have on our watch.

## War in Gaza

**Mr Tennyson:** The killing of seven World Central Kitchen aid workers last week in Gaza is another horrifying milestone in the conflict. Those men and women were heroes, putting themselves at risk to support those most in need, and their deaths are a sadly inevitable consequence of the callous manner in which war is being waged by the far-right Israeli Government.

Like others, I have watched on in despair and distress at the escalating violence, murder, destruction and mass starvation that has been orchestrated over the past six months. To be clear, I stand in full solidarity with the victims of the abhorrent Hamas attacks on 7 October and commend the families who are campaigning with dignity for the safe return of their loved ones who have been taken hostage. However, those vile attacks can be no justification for the illegal collective punishment and slaughter of Palestinian civilians that has followed.

Defeat of Hamas will not be achieved through famine and humanitarian crisis, nor will the foundations for lasting peace and security be laid on the graves of thousands of innocent women and children. I am always reluctant to draw glib comparisons between international conflicts; however, the one lesson that we can export from our experience in Northern Ireland is that progress cannot be made until the killing stops. There is no military solution here. That is why there must be an immediate permanent ceasefire, release of hostages without further delay and a recommitment from international leaders to diplomatic efforts towards a two-state solution.

The United Nations Secretary-General, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have all said that Israel is engaged in grave violations of international law, and the International Criminal Court has said that there is a plausible case that Israel's actions are a breach of the genocide convention. In that context and with the Israeli Government showing no intention of heeding their allies, the international community can no longer shirk its responsibilities. The UK Government must now comply with their own moral and domestic and international legal obligations and immediately move to suspend arms sales to Israel.

## St Luke's Football Club

**Mr Baker:** I congratulate St Luke's Football Club's under-17 team on winning its fourth cup on Friday night. What makes that so special is that this is their first year competing as an under-17 outfit. St Luke's senior football team has been the cornerstone of the Collin community for decades, but, over the past number of years, it has seen a drop-off in numbers, with many talented young boys dropping out of football at 16 and 17. Last year, the club put out a call for young players to join a new under-17 team and was overwhelmed by the response. The team has not looked back since and has been involved in so many community projects from community clean-ups to graffiti removal. They are an absolute credit to our community and to their parents. I also want it noted that none of that would be possible without the coaches who volunteer their time to give pathways to our young people to enable them to continue in sport. Well done to Ciaran Boyd, OB and all the lads.

## Derry County Football Team

**Mr Durkan:** Ba mhaith liom an ráiteas seo a dhéanamh inniu le comhghairdeas a dhéanamh le peileadóirí, bainisteoirí agus lucht tacaíochta Dhoire, mé féin ina measc, faoin bhua iontach a fuair siad seachtain ó shin i bPáirc an Chrócaigh. *[Translation: I would like to make this statement today to congratulate the Derry footballers, managers and supporters, of whom I am one, on the great victory that they achieved in Croke Park a week ago.]* I congratulate the County Derry senior football team, management, back-room team and supporters on winning the National Football League Division 1 final in Croke Park against Dublin last week. The match itself was a real thriller. I have just about got my voice back, although the nails might take another wee while. Fans went through a roller coaster of emotions before the Oak Leaf men showed nerves of steel and emerged victorious after a penalty shoot-out. The joy and relief were palpable when captain Conor Glass was presented with the trophy by Uachtarán Chumann Lúthchleas Gael, Jarlath Burns. *[Translation: the Gaelic Athletic Association President, Jarlath Burns.]* Derry football is used to ups and downs, having been relegated to Division 4 in recent seasons. The team's resilience, determination, vision, ambition and ability have seen it bounce back to the top table. It has been a while since 1993, but we have enjoyed huge success in recent years. As well as a National Football League title, Derry has won back-to-back Ulster Championships.

Glen and Steelstown have had all-Ireland club success, and the lift that that has given Derry cannot be overstated.

It is not just dyed-in-the-wool Gaels who have a spring in their step over recent success. Interest and participation in Gaelic games has grown across the county but nowhere more so than in Derry city. It was fantastic to see the involvement of four players from city clubs, all from Steelstown Brian Ógs, in the successful campaign, with two of them playing in the final last week. It has been amazing and inspirational to see clubs open their doors to more and more members, maximising the number of people who can enjoy the physical, mental and social benefits of participating in sport and culture. The popularity of Gaelic Mothers & Others teams is a great example of that.

The success of sport in boosting individuals and building communities is something that I have previously acknowledged. The contribution that coaches make across all our sporting codes is measured not in the number of trophies won but in the number of lives on which they impact positively. Here is hoping that Mickey Harte and the Derry boys continue to impact positively on mine.

### Derry County Football Team

**Mr Delargy:** I also congratulate Derry on its league win. In just five short years, Derry has gone from Division 4 to Division 1 champions. What an incredible performance the weekend before last by our county. It is a testament to the great work of the coaches, the management and, of course, the players, who have given their all throughout.

I want to mention three players in particular: Diarmuid Baker, Cahir McMonagle and Donncha Gilmore. Those three players from Steelstown Brian Ógs have come through and been so successful this year on the panel. It is really inspirational for young Gaels in Derry to see players at that high level not just from their county but from their city, from their own club and, indeed, from their own area.

I also congratulate the Derry hurlers, who recently won the Division 2B final and who continue to make great strides for the sport in Ulster. I also mention Derry camogs, who will play Westmeath in the league final this Sunday. We send our best wishes to the squad and look forward to its continued success.

There is excitement in Derry that something big is on the horizon. Fans have played a pivotal role in galvanising the atmosphere around that. I am privileged to play a small part in that by organising transport from Derry and across the county to Croke Park for those matches. I want and expect to stand up in the Chamber in the coming months as Derry sees more success.

### Armagh Ladies Football Team

**Mr McNulty:** I offer a hearty comhghairdeas [*Translation: congratulations*] to Armagh Ladies Gaelic footballers, who had a victory yesterday in Croke Park in the league final against who else but the kingdom. There are ways of winning finals, and winning finals against the kingdom is always the best way. I congratulate them on their victory; on their trailblazing over so many years; on their leadership; and on being role models. For Armagh to be the first team in the country that has its own GAA grounds for ladies Gaelic football is testament to the ambition and leadership shown by the county board and the players over a generation. Comhghairdeas [*Translation: congratulations*] to the Armagh girls.

### Windsor Framework (Implementation) Regulations 2024

**Mr Allister:** The Windsor Framework (Implementation) Regulations 2024 are a product of the tainted Donaldson deal. They require further comment and exposure. As we await the Secretary of State's directions to DAERA under the regulations, it seems clear from their content that those directions will not apply to documentary checks at the Irish Sea border, thus exploding the DUP/Donaldson myth or boast of zero paperwork. There are over 6,000 documentary checks each month because of the requirements of the EU customs code, which was imposed unaltered by the protocol on the premise that all goods coming from Great Britain are coming from a foreign country, in its terms, into EU territory. Herein continues the greatest constitutional obscenity of the tainted Donaldson deal.

To add insult to that constitutional injury is the fact that the latest regulations pull the teeth of the Assembly and its Windsor Framework Committee by removing the right to call for papers and to call Ministers and persons. That means that proper scrutiny is impossible and the Windsor Framework Committee is in danger of becoming a mere sham as a result. In legislating for the Windsor Framework Committee, much was made of its scrutiny powers by those who advocated it. Now, at a

stroke, the scrutiny powers have been removed and all under the same DUP deal.

I fought long and hard to get section 11 of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 through the Assembly, under which Committees were given the tools to do the job of scrutiny. That section now is deliberately and consciously excluded from applying to all protocol measures. Clearly, Sir Jeffrey and the DUP negotiators did not want scrutiny of what is now their protocol. Shame on them. It seems that the protocol implementers do, indeed, love darkness rather than light.

## Gaza War

**Mr Carroll:** What kind of horror will it take for the Executive to condemn Israel's genocidal actions in Gaza? Over 33,000 people are dead, with eight being killed every hour. Generations upon generations of Palestinian families have been wiped out, and their memories, cultures, hopes and dreams are gone. Israel is systematically starving some two million Palestinians, forcing them to live on 245 calories per day. We have seen children deliberately targeted by Israeli snipers and aid workers and medical workers murdered, all without accountability. The list goes on and on.

12.45 pm

Yet this Executive, a supposed bastion of peace and peacebuilding, have not uttered a single word about the evil that is unfolding. Where is the Executive's call for a ceasefire? Where are the joint statements of condemnation? This Government, which, patronisingly, hold up our flawed peace process as an example to the world, cannot even bring themselves to criticise a raft of bloodthirsty war criminals who are committing a genocide in daylight. Northern exceptionalism should not be an excuse to ignore a genocide. If the DUP and Sinn Féin can present a united front to schmooze with genocide backer Joe Biden, then they should, surely, be able to criticise an apartheid state that has massacred people with impunity.

In the past six months alone, Israel has bombed Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, Iran and Yemen. Not only have the British and US Governments continued to fund the slaughter and arm the Israeli state to the hilt, they have joined in on the bombing of places such as Yemen. Despite the horror that we have seen, the liberal media and western Governments, supposed defenders of democracy, continue to

gobble up and spew out Israel's base propaganda. The state, which some months ago denied that it would ever attack a hospital, has launched 48 attacks on healthcare facilities in the Gaza Strip, including the now decimated Al-Shifa hospital.

What kind of Executive cannot collectively condemn the barbarity that we have seen? We have seen babies lying dead and decomposing on beds in hospitals that people were forced to flee to due to Israeli bombs and bullets, with not a word from this Executive. We have heard about pregnant women going through C-sections without any anaesthetic but not a word from the Stormont Executive. People have been found bulldozed and buried in the rubble of hospitals but there has not been a single word about it.

Palestine is the litmus test of our humanity and the ruling parties here and across the world are failing that test every single day. Therefore, it is up to ordinary people to challenge them. People need to keep pushing for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel, not just to punish the genocide but to help dismantle the savage occupation and apartheid system that has been imposed on the Palestinian people for 75-plus years.

We must redouble our efforts to turn Ireland into an anti-apartheid island, North and South. We need to keep marching to expel the Israeli ambassador —

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

**Mr Carroll:** — and bring BDS into our workplaces.

## Assembly Business

### Committee Membership

**Mr Speaker:** The next item of business is a motion on Committee membership.

*Resolved:*

*That Mr William Irwin replace Mr Gary Middleton as a member of the Committee on Procedures; and that Mr Brian Kingston replace Mr Stephen Dunne as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. — [Mr Clarke.]*

**Mr Speaker:** I ask Members to take their ease while we make a change at the top Table before we start the next debate.

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

## Private Members' Business

### Shared Future: Strategic Framework

**Ms Bradshaw:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly recognises the ongoing need to build a genuinely shared future; expresses concern at the ongoing and severe costs, both social and financial, of continued social and economic segregation; notes the value of increasing numbers of people now enjoying educational, sporting and career opportunities free from the confines of traditional community divisions; further recognises the need to expand these opportunities to the entire community, including by ensuring that public money is spent on delivery of public services that are open to all rather than on maintaining or further embedding division; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring forward a strategic framework for a shared future delivering public-sector reform to tackle the costs of division while building on good relations work already undertaken.*

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

**Ms Bradshaw:** In proposing the motion, I wish to be clear that it is, in many ways, a positive motion. Much of what I say will reflect on the significant progress that has been made in our society since the Good Friday Agreement, even if that has often been in spite of, rather than because of, the endless challenges that the political institutions that were founded by that agreement have had to endure. Indeed, in many ways, the argument that my colleagues and I will make today is that politics needs to catch up with society. As we plan our Programme for Government and Budget, we still need to think about the potential for a fourth pillar to add to the three of planet, people and prosperity that are in existence. We would like to see peace added to those.

The motion, which I hope will secure cross-party support, will require the First Minister and deputy First Minister to take forward the development of a shared future strategic

framework. That would require each Department to develop and deliver its services and programmes in ways that ensure that they reflect the need to prioritise and promote peace and reconciliation and to meaningfully challenge and tackle the cost of division. Part of the story that we will set out today will be about great progress, great advance and great opportunity, and part of it will be about the ongoing scars in our society and the many communities that have not fully benefited from that progress. Those scars are sometimes literal in our built environment, most obviously in the form of the so-called peace walls that were all supposed to have been brought down by last year. However, we should not forget that the cost in lost progress and lost opportunity is borne not by infrastructure but by people.

A genuinely shared future, to be clear, is not a neutral future where we are afraid to express ourselves. On the contrary, it is one where people can express their cultural heritage with confidence and where we are not confined to one side of the sectarian fault line in seeking out opportunities to express ourselves. It is a future where the drummer in the band parade offers up an opportunity to play the drum to a young lad coming home from GAA training; it is one where Irish-language classes take place in inner city east Belfast; and it is one where the same person vies to play on the county panel in the summer and on the provincial team in the winter. The point is that all that already happens, and I firmly believe that it happens considerably more than it did. It is our shared present. We just need a lot more of it.

In many communities, however, segregation remains a way of life. Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) has been of value to many such communities, but it has at times, perhaps, been too programmatic, focusing on local interventions in areas that then become reliant on that short-term funding rather than on a strategic policy overview through public-sector delivery that would make the fundamental and necessary changes in how our society as a whole functions. For example, in my constituency, one of our local youth clubs has been advised that its budget will be severely reduced this year. We know that those are the very structures through which good relations work can be delivered, so, if we were to stop duplicating our services, that would free up money for long-term, front-line and sustained delivery.

We can quote the literal cost of segregation. As long ago as 2007, a Deloitte report put that cost at £1.5 billion. Certainly, no one seriously disputes that it runs into hundreds of millions of

pounds. That is a financial cost. It effectively comes off money that, as I just said, could be spent on efficient public services, particularly in the areas that need them most. However, perhaps the bigger issue is the social cost. Those communities in which the fear of different identities and outlooks prevails are also the ones in which living standards and life expectancies tend to be lower, often markedly so. Overcoming that fear and embracing opportunity is not an easy task, but if it leads to communities that are more open to the opportunities offered by diversity, it will surely lead to communities that are happier, healthier and more prosperous.

We need to find ways to focus on the opportunities that would arise if we brought down the walls, both literal and metaphorical, that divide us. When we live with walls for generations, they inevitably become the norm, but we must never stop reinforcing the point that dividing communities with walls is abnormal. The peace monitoring report published in November 2023 notes that intercommunal violence is now extremely rare, so we have to address the fear that many people still live with. A strategic framework could help by delivering policy outcomes, for example by improving air quality and increasing levels of economic opportunity in urban areas, which would reduce fear by bringing communities together with common cause across walls. The strategic framework should sit with the First Minister and deputy First Minister because of their coordination role in cross-departmental outcomes and outworkings.

We must also confront the reality that there are still communities that live a pre-1998 existence, in single-identity areas, often, sadly, complete with paramilitary trappings, where children and young people continue even in 2024 to be exploited. Sadly, we saw that in Derry over Easter. The motion asks the Assembly, however, to confirm its determination that moving on from that type of existence everywhere is a good thing. We must no longer allow anywhere to settle for breeding fear and limiting future prospects. The mixing of our population and the growing presence of newcomers and their families have changed the face of Northern Ireland. Surveys show that it is widely recognised that they have done so for the better: with diversity comes opportunity.

The recent peace monitoring report makes it clear that the greatest growth in prejudice is not along sectarian lines but along racial lines. Race is now the most common basis of crime with hate motivation. Most people reported to the Northern Ireland life and times survey in

2022 that they felt that there is as much or more racial prejudice now than five years ago, yet our racial equality strategy — another case where there is a need for cross-departmental cooperation and collaboration — has not been fully implemented one year from its conclusion, and we remain the only part of the UK without a final refugee integration strategy.

There is learning not just from T:BUC but from the original 'A Shared Future' policy dating from 2005, which set as its objective:

*“The establishment over time of a normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere, and where all people are treated impartially”*

and thus of:

*“A society where there is equity, respect for diversity and a recognition of our interdependence”.*

That objective still holds true today, including for tackling all forms of prejudice and discrimination. That is why the motion calls specifically for a strategic framework. We want to see policies developed and delivered through co-design and in a cohesive way so that a commitment to a shared future free from prejudice while maximising opportunity is woven into everything our Executive parties do.

I hope that I have set out the many benefits to us all of building a shared future, overcoming segregation and ending prejudice, building on work already undertaken. Yet we still need the fourth pillar — planet, people, prosperity and peace. Therefore, I urge all Members to back the motion to replace a bitter, fearful and divided past with a reconciled, hopeful and shared future that is led by all our Executive Ministers under a strategic framework. Thank you.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I thank the Member for opening the debate, and I call Carál Ní Chuilín.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil le Páirtí na Comhghuaillíochta as an rún thábhachtach seo a mholadh. Tacaím leis an rún. [Translation: I thank the Alliance Party for tabling this important motion, which I support.] There is a lot that we could say. In 10 minutes, you kept yourself to fairly confined words. First, we need to discuss a couple of things. This is the elephant in the room: there is

still sectarianism out there. We agree on that. There is also a lot of focus on sectarianism, particularly in working-class and deprived areas. We recognise that, but we also need to deal with the middle-class sectarianism that has gone on for a long time.

I put on record my thanks to the many people who, throughout all sorts of years, have continued to show leadership in interfaces. I also want to talk about the elephant in the room, particularly when we are talking about tackling paramilitaries through Communities in Transition (CIT). In the area that I represent, it is armed criminal gangs. We need to call that out as well.

Do they still have the ability to coerce and control young people and cause sectarian problems? They absolutely do. Regrettably, I saw that as recently as a couple of weeks ago in North Belfast.

**1.00 pm**

The children, young people and residents who are involved in youth work do it together. They may do single identity work, but, when it comes to evaluating and making sure that there are enough staff and diversionary youth workers, they do it together. That is greatly appreciated, and it is worth putting it on record. That occurs across the communities. I have seen it. Young people take risks when there is a lack of political leadership. They will continue to do that. We need to continue their funding at the very least. We all need to review what will happen to good relations or whatever.

There are also economic impacts. Without T:BUC, Communities in Transition (CIT) and the Engage programme, some young people in particular are extremely vulnerable and could get involved in the criminal justice system. From there, it goes on and on. It becomes intergenerational and harder to crack. What I have seen this past lot of years compared with what I saw in previous years is that people are doing this. They were doing co-design and co-production well before we were talking about it. As Paula said, communities are often ahead of us political leaders. They have been doing it for some time.

I want to mention North Belfast. Regrettably, we have an interface right through a park, but that has now opened up. I remember David Ford being there when it opened up, and, in fairness, he recognised the communities, but the communities were not recognised enough by officials then. It was the communities who took

the risks. It was the communities who spoke to their neighbours, the youth groups and the mother-and-toddler groups, went to the libraries and worked really hard to get that done. They are doing the same thing in Girdwood, North Queen Street, Duncairn Gardens, the Limestone Road and Clifton Street. Unfortunately, there are about eight interfaces, but four of them are still particularly problematic. As Brian Kingston knows, they are problematic because a small cohort of young people are determined to cause trouble.

The overarching sense of a need for better funding for good relations is the elephant in the room. We need to mop up all of that in different Departments and give good leadership. We must say to those areas in particular, "We see you. We know who you are. We value you. We want to be productive in the change that comes forward, and we want to do it together. Above all else, we'll listen to you". I am delighted to say cúpla focal [*Translation: a few words*] about this issue. It is really important. The need for a bespoke service does not come from community relations or anybody else; it comes from the ground up. They have got it. Let us recognise that when we look at funding. We should not only congratulate them on their achievements thus far but make it easier for them to do that really hard work on our behalf.

**Mr Harvey:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. It calls, first, on the House to recognise the ongoing need to build a genuinely shared future. Many of us in the Chamber have, for many years, been committed to playing our part in seeing a shared future become a reality. The DUP is focused on making Northern Ireland work for everyone. We are committed to a shared future and to playing our part in building it, provided that it acknowledges and caters for all of our communities and identities across Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, on occasion, the genuineness and sincerity of some in relation to a shared future ring hollow when it becomes apparent that their concept of a shared future seems to be to freeze out those with whom they disagree or those who do not fit their narrative. A genuine shared future must celebrate, acknowledge and cater for everyone. Community integration can be achieved only through natural permeation. It is a community that integrates. Whilst government can provide tools and mechanisms to support the creation and strengthening of social cohesion across traditional tribalism, it cannot engage in the business of integration itself, nor should it seek to force artificially contrived notions of integration on society. If we mean to be

genuinely realistic around the subject and not bandy it about as a fashionable vote-winner, we need to acknowledge that a shared future does not equate to a one-size-fits-all policy.

Take education, for example: there is a reluctance by many to recognise that natural integration in the controlled sector, particularly the grammar sector, is just as favourable as that found in the integrated sector. Some would have us believe that integration does not happen outside of the integrated sector: that is an insult to the many schools across Northern Ireland that are often more integrated and diverse in their intake than many integrated schools.

**Miss McAllister:** Will the Member take an intervention?

**Mr Harvey:** Yes, just a wee second. The idea that parental choice can be set aside in favour of one elevated sector is wrong. Go ahead.

**Miss McAllister:** Parental choice is not there for the parents who wish to send their children to integrated schools, because there are not any available for them. Does the Member agree that the schools that he has spoken about, which are integrated in nature, have nothing to fear in undergoing the true transformation to becoming an integrated school?

**Mr Harvey:** I thank the Member and welcome her intervention and comments.

I return to the wording of the motion, which acknowledges those who enjoy:

*"educational, sporting and career opportunities free from the confines of ... community divisions"*

And

*"recognises the need to expand these opportunities to the entire community"*.

The motion intimates that there are some by whom such opportunities cannot be accessed. I am interested to know to whom and what that refers, given that we live in a free country and that individuals are at liberty to study where they wish, work where they wish and enjoy whatever leisure activities they wish. Similarly, they have the ability and opportunity to enjoy cultural and identity-based pursuits. The motion appears to cite the example of public services that are not open to all in justification of that argument. That is a very alarming inference to make. If that is believed to be the case, those



making the inference should spell out what public services they are referring to and whether they have raised those inequalities with the Equality Commission.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Harvey:** I will.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Thank you for the opportunity. I thought that I had spelt quite a bit of it out, but an example is a new housing development in my constituency that went for shared housing funding and got turned down. There are practical examples of where funding has not been given when people wanted to progress good relations and a shared future.

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

**Mr Harvey:** I welcome the Member's comments.

The key to building a sustainable and lasting shared future will not be found in attacking someone's freedom to choose, maintain and develop their identity. In recent decades, we have welcomed many thousands of migrants to the UK to work and live, bringing with them an eclectic array of cultures, religions and traditions. We call that "diversity", not "division". There should be no difference in how we view our domestic cultures. Our shared future can and should celebrate such diversity, as it is intrinsic to our identity.

As we continue to transition as a post-conflict society, there are undoubtedly areas in which needless financial and social segregation can and should be combated. That can be achieved with community buy-in through a bottom-up approach that achieves tangible results. We should focus on what we can do to build on the foundations already laid and what has been successful in the past in our future government-led initiatives —

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

**Mr Harvey:** — be that a revamp of urban villages or building successful community schemes.

**Mr Nesbitt:** While it is on my mind — before I forget — Carál Ní Chuilín made reference to "middle-class sectarianism", which is an important issue to be debated. I am not sure whether she has read John Hewitt's fabulous

poem 'The Coasters', but, if she has, she will know that it speaks very much to her theme. I have a spare copy if she is interested.

I begin with our foundational document — the 1998 agreement — and quote paragraphs 2 and 3 of the declaration of support. Paragraph 2 talks about the "tragedies of the past" leaving:

*"a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering"*

and the fact that "we must never forget" but:

*"we can best honour ... through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all."*

Paragraph 3 states that there is a commitment to "partnership, equality and mutual respect". Those concepts — partnership, equality and mutual respect — acknowledge the fact that we have different identities that we cherish. This is not about everybody jumping into the equivalent of a virtual blender and coming out the human form of beige. Republicans will be republicans, nationalists will be nationalists, unionists will be unionists, and those who do not want to be labelled as such will not be labelled as such. Without getting too far up on my hobby horse, if we are having a review of the agreement, we need to define what we mean by "reconciliation". We need to find another word to replace "tolerance", which, for me, is simply about the absence of hostility. It needs to be something a bit more positive. We need to find another term for "others", because that is demeaning to the Alliance Party, given its current level of support.

On division, I reported on far too much of the Troubles as a broadcast journalist. Politicians came in to bemoan the fact that we were a divided society. The one shining example of difference was the former leader of the SDLP John Hume, who talked not about division but about diversity. He talked about diversity being a strength and part of the human condition. That is what we need to focus on in this debate and in the work that we perform in the rest of the mandate.

The proposer of the motion talked about placing a duty on each Department to look at the issue. I would be more comfortable if it were an Executive-led initiative. My fear is that we might repeat what I consider to be mistakes from the previous mandate. We had, for example, an initiative from the Department for Communities on shared housing, but, at the same time, the

Department of Education had an initiative on shared education. The problem was that, geographically, they were separate. Surely it would make much more sense if the shared housing were to surround the shared education campuses. I do think that it should be about having a son of the social investment fund, under which there was £40 million for dereliction and £40 million for deprivation. That was perceived too often to be an orange and green carve-up. We can learn from what we have done in the past and do it better in the future.

I have been here 13 years. I sense something different in the air. I sense a positivity that I have not really felt before. I sense a determination to deliver that I have not felt before. I sense possibilities that I have not felt before, possibilities to truly deliver for all our people by looking at this place that we all call "home" and respecting each other's differences and identities and finding many common causes. I am happy to support the thrust of the motion.

**Mr O'Toole:** I and the SDLP will, of course, support today's motion, which I commend the Alliance Party for tabling.

I will make a few points about the motion and on the broad theme of reconciliation and moving our society away from division. The work of ending division is core to my party.

Mr Nesbitt mentioned our former leader. We in the SDLP sometimes talk about our former leader Mr Hume, and we are sometimes accused of talking about him too much. As a moral, intellectual and political North Star, he left us with, among other things, a belief that difference and diversity must not and should not become a source of division. Of course, we know that, in this part of Ireland, difference has been a source of division, and, sadly, it continues to be so. Our core mission is to end all the divisions in this place and on the island of Ireland in all the different ways they manifest.

### 1.15 pm

When I returned to this place to become a politician four years ago, I had been away for nearly 20 years. I am part of the Good Friday Agreement generation. I am never entirely clear about when those generations begin or end, but I was 15 when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, and I am a middle-aged man now. I was away from the island for nearly 20 years. I returned regularly, but when I moved back here, I was struck by some of the individual, discrete

bits of progress that had been made. I was proud to represent what is probably the most diverse, most shared constituency on this island — South Belfast. I was also struck by the many ways in which division continued to plague and define this society. We should be honest and direct about that, because sectarianism continues to be extraordinarily defining in this society. Sometimes, it is important not to minimise that and pretend that it does not exist.

Carál Ní Chuilín was right when she said that there is sometimes a tendency to pretend or imply that sectarianism is either something that them-uns do, but not us, or, indeed, that it is something that plagues or affects working-class communities and that others do not need to deal with it. That is simply not true.

Division is profound, deep and defining in this society, but what do we mean by a strategic framework for a shared future? We are happy to support the motion because it is important that this be a core priority for the new Executive, and I hope that agreement of the motion today means there will be specific commitments in the new Programme for Government around delivery.

I will touch briefly on something very disappointing in relation to building a shared future that has happened under the new dispensation, which is the cut to integrated education funding. The UK Government removed a ring fence, and that has affected 10 integrated and shared projects. In particular, 10 integrated schools that expected new schools to be built that will now not be built. It is important to say that although the UK Government removed the ring fence, that did not impose any duty on any Executive Minister to not spend the money. They could have put the ring fence back for those integrated schools, but they chose not to. I have answers to questions for written answer from both the Education Minister and the Finance Minister, who appear to say different things about when they were formally told that the shared and integrated education funding had been cut. What is clear is that it was known by mid-February, by both the Finance Department and the Education Department, that the funding was going to be cut, but the schools were not told until a week later.

In the interim, there was a visit by the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Education Minister to a new shared education project in Limavady. It is a great project, and I do not in any way diminish its importance, but there are concerns about the timing of the announcement and the fact that Ministers

appeared to know that the money was going to be cut from integrated schools but went along to dig ground at the Limavady shared education project. I say that because it is important, and the reason I made the point, and we will follow up on that, is that we need to be serious, specific and real about delivery when it comes to building a shared future and not simply indulge in photo ops.

Finally, as I have only 10 seconds left, all of us who have a constitutional aspiration, whether that is Northern Ireland remaining in the UK or a new Ireland, need to be able to explain how our vision for the future will involve ending division and building a reconciled society, and that is not impossible. I commend the motion. I am pleased to support it, and I hope that we see real delivery in a Programme for Government.

**Mr Delargy:** First, the motion is useful to assess where we are and where we are going. I thank the Alliance Party for tabling the motion.

I will touch specifically on a few elements and look at their practical impact in my constituency and at the space to develop and improve on them. Those are within the T:BUC strategy and around education and Urban Villages. The seven strands of T:BUC are funded by the Executive, and 30,000 young people, including a huge number from my constituency, have taken part in and benefited from them. From that, it is very clear, as all those young people have experienced, that, to move forward as a society, we need to tackle sectarianism, racism and other forms of intolerance that we see. Critically, as Carál mentioned, it is about doing that on the ground. At a policy level, we can support such action and bring forward strategies to benefit it, but it has to come organically from communities and be supported from the political side.

As a former teacher, most of my experience prior to coming here was in the education sector. I was privileged to teach in an integrated school — Oakgrove Integrated Primary School in Derry — and see its huge benefits to the community and how it worked practically, on a day-to-day basis, at breaking down barriers and divisions. That is very positive. We have seen hugely positive developments at the Strule campus, where there are 4,000 pupils, and, as Mr O'Toole mentioned, in Limavady. I welcome those examples as a positive step forward, but I recognise that there are huge steps that we need to continue to take.

We need to bank what is positive but also review what needs to change. That is critical. In addition the content of the motion, which Ms

Bradshaw spoke very well to, there is space for us to do that. Importantly, in all of this, it is about us working collectively and continuing to have these conversations in a positive and constructive way to assess what is going well and what we need to change.

I come from an Urban Villages area: the Moor in Derry. There has been positive development there. In the Fountain, we have seen the New Gate Arts and Culture Centre, and we have seen the redevelopment of the city centre and the city walls. In the areas that I come from, we have seen the redevelopment of Meenan Square and of Central Drive in Creggan. One of the biggest things that has happened as a result of Urban Villages, which we need to continue bringing into other communities, is that, by tackling sectarianism and intolerance, we have managed to tackle some of the economic disparity across the North. Looking at the whole socio-economic piece around that is fundamental. I recognise and welcome that that is very much part of the motion.

The reality, however, is that, while we look at the benefits of all that, there are still peace walls up in that area. That has already been mentioned. We cannot stand still. I welcome the fact that the motion was tabled and will support it. This is a great opportunity for us to evaluate where we are and how to get to the stage of moving that into communities. I agree that communities are well ahead of us. I have spoken to a number of people in my own area and areas across the Moor who are very much willing to move to the next step and look at where we can go. This is about building relationships, reducing duplication of services and working together in Stormont and in our communities.

One element that we need to expand out to, which the motion does not really touch on, is tackling division not just within our communities but across our island. Being in a border constituency, one of the key reasons for the duplication of services that I see is the fact that we are divided across the island. I would like to continue to have conversations about that, collectively, and to develop that element.

I welcome the motion. I will support it. I look forward to working with the Alliance Party and others to develop the framework in the time ahead.

**Mr Kingston:** A shared future for the people of Northern Ireland is something that, I trust, we are all committed to in the Assembly. Indeed, that is a key theme of the Executive. For example, the Executive Office has programmes

such as Together: Building a United Community, Urban Villages and Communities in Transition. It is also facilitated by many other Executive Departments, including the Department of Education, through the shared education initiatives that many schools participate in. The Department for Communities also facilitates that in the collaborative working that takes place between communities through programmes such as neighbourhood renewal.

The DUP recognises that a shared future does not mean trying to do away with personal, family and community identities. Rather, it means promoting tolerance. It means recognising this as a place that has a range of identities and recognising people's right to choose to associate or not to associate with any particular identity.

In education, we in the DUP respect parental choice and the fact that there is a number of sectors in our school system as a result. Those schools must be of a viable size in the interest of the public purse. It is not just schools in the integrated sector that have a diverse enrolment; in particular, many schools in the grammar sector and the controlled sector have diverse enrolments that go across a range of community and ethnic backgrounds.

Statutory services must be open and accessible to all, particularly lower-income families, who are more likely to be reliant on public services. Importantly, that does not mean that public services should not be located in areas that are predominantly associated with one side of the community in Northern Ireland. If public services were removed, such an approach could compound disadvantage by reducing the uptake of those services.

We in the DUP certainly support a shared future. We are committed to investing in and transforming our public services to ensure that they are accessible to everyone. However, we need an approach to the debate that is respectful and tolerant of the many national and cultural identities that exist in communities across Northern Ireland. Community engagement is central to building a shared and inclusive future. Without community buy-in, that transition is simply not feasible.

Passing motions in the Assembly can be very detached from the realities on the ground. Over many years, I have worked with community and elected representatives and statutory services in the greater Shankill and North Belfast to improve community relations and address periods of increased tension when there have been clashes and attacks as, sadly, has been

the case recently. As Carál Ní Chuilín did, I pay tribute to those community and elected representatives and statutory services who work on those difficult issues and make a genuine difference at community level, particularly for those living in interface areas.

**Ms Egan:** I am glad to speak on the motion today, particularly as it calls for the development of a cross-departmental shared future strategy. My and my party's vision of a shared future is one where everyone can be safe, play their part and be treated fairly and with respect. We believe in a society for everyone that is underpinned by our shared values of equality, respect, diversity and interdependence. People must be free from intimidation, discrimination and fear.

As well as the societal impact of division in a post-conflict society, there is also a huge financial cost. My colleague highlighted the Deloitte report from 2007, which estimated that the division was costing Northern Ireland between £800 million and £1.5 billion per year. Research that Ulster University produced last year estimated that, in the education system alone, the cost of division is £226 million per year, which is £600,000 every day. That is a staggering sum, but the issue is not just about the financial cost; it is about the societal impact that such division has on Northern Ireland as a whole.

I will highlight and come back to comments that were made about facilities and provisions not being open to all. It was shameful that previous Executives did not act on the fact that the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 does not apply to teachers. That is a clear and tangible example of where people could be discriminated against and have no legal protections. I welcome that Chris Lyttle, my former colleague in the Alliance Party, brought forward a private Member's Bill to address that, and I understand that that will come into force later this year. However, it is disappointing that Executives did not take that forward.

### 1.30 pm

Significant change is needed to reduce the impact of division in our society. That cannot be the responsibility of one Department, which is why we call on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to lead on a strategy to embed sharing, integration and cohesion across all Departments and public services. I recognise, however, that, to move forward, we must not forget about the past. There is much work that

we still need to do to progress and address our history in Northern Ireland. I would like to see the sectarian demarcation of areas with flags, murals and banners that promote proscribed paramilitary organisations fully outlawed, with legislation to ensure that public bodies remove such material.

We have a legacy Act that was introduced against the will of the parties in Northern Ireland and overwhelmingly opposed by victims and survivors. The mechanisms in that Act do not put the needs of victims first and will not lead to a more reconciled society. I would like to see the Executive take forward proposals for a pension for those bereaved by the Troubles. We have seen many families fall between the cracks and be left disappointed that their trauma and pain have not been recognised by previous payment schemes.

Here and now, I recognise that work is being done in communities to promote cohesion and integration. In North Down, my constituency, I have seen at first hand some of the good work funded by the Communities in Transition project in Kilcooley and Rathgill; however, I would like to see those projects be a lot more flexible. Unfortunately, many in North Down will tell you that paramilitary activity is not limited to those two estates in Bangor. It is important that initiatives from the Executive reflect that.

As colleagues have said, it is important to recognise that our local communities are way ahead of politicians on this issue. The best examples of community cohesion and inclusive initiatives are more often than not driven by local people in their areas — provided by youth workers, women's centres and mental health initiatives on the ground.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Egan:** Yes, I will.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Does the Member agree that, if we were to address the cost of division, there would be more money for sustained services in the communities that she has just described?

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

**Ms Egan:** I thank the Member for her intervention. I agree, and there is a body of evidence to back up those claims.

To move towards a truly shared and integrated society, I want to see us go beyond the old narrative of two communities in Northern

Ireland. We are an increasingly diverse place. It is important that equality and human rights issues are an essential part of a shared future. It is regrettable that more progress was not made on a bill of rights for Northern Ireland in the previous mandate. That could have been an important tool to enshrine rights for all and ensure that those who are marginalised are protected.

I want a shared future to mean a society in which everyone is welcome and free from discrimination. I am extremely concerned by the recent rise in hate crimes recorded by PSNI with race as the motivator. Addressing hate crime needs to be a factor in building a shared society and a united community. As I said, good relations should no longer be about the old narrative of two communities but for everybody in society. I would like to see that underpinned by a strategy for the integration of refugees into our society and full implementation of the racial equality strategy.

This matter affects our entire society, and there are many issues that I would like to speak about, but I am running out of time. Before I bring my remarks to a close, I will say that, when it comes to human rights and inclusion, it is also important that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities is incorporated into domestic law.

This debate is about creating a framework for a shared and united Northern Ireland, addressing our past to create a society in which everyone is equal and free from discrimination.

**Ms Sheerin:** I support the motion, and I congratulate the Alliance Party on tabling it. It is a really important conversation, and, as Members have said, it is useful that we take stock of where we are in the North, as we are a post-colonial, post-conflict society. We have to acknowledge that sectarianism exists and that we will deal with it only if we have a conversation about it, so I totally support the motion.

Unity and unification are, obviously, fundamental to my politics; I am an Irish republican. We have just celebrated Easter, and at Easter we reflect on the words of the proclamation to the Irish people of 1916, which clearly stated that the Irish nation was for Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. That is the politics to which I align myself, the basis of my political activism and the reason why I am here in the Chamber.

We know that the costs of division are multiple, visceral, visible and tangible. They are very

real. Unfortunately, in the past, people have paid the ultimate price because of division and sectarianism. We are not in that place any more, but we want to move very much away from it. Today's motion and this conversation are helpful in that, because we need to govern for everybody.

I note that Ms Egan referred to the bill of rights, on which we did a lot of work in the previous mandate. I chaired the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights, and it was regrettable that, at that point, the two unionist parties blocked the delivery of a bill of rights. I would like to see that —

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

**Ms Sheerin:** Yes, I will.

**Mr Nesbitt:** What is the evidence that the Ulster Unionist Party was anything other than supportive? You will remember that I was Deputy Chair when you were Chair.

**Ms Sheerin:** I thank the Member for his intervention.

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

**Ms Sheerin:** I refer the Member to a body of evidence on the Assembly website that clearly points to the meeting at which your colleague Alan Chambers provided a document and said that he did not believe that a bill of rights was necessary for the North. You can reflect on the Hansard report, which will show that clearly.

My point is that we have to govern for everybody, and ensuring rights for everybody is helpful. That is the space that we need to be in and the conversation that we need to have. The inclusion of everybody, regardless of their background, is important, as is acknowledging those differences and that we all have different lived experiences. As others have referred to, there has been a change in attitude during this mandate. That is welcome. When people participate in other people's cultures, embrace the fact that we all have differences and take the opportunity to enjoy things that we may not have been brought up with, it is a richer experience for everyone. Nobody is hurt by that. That needs to be perpetuated and built on during the mandate. I hope to see more of that. I congratulate the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their example of doing that thus far, because we need to see an end to segregation in our hearts and minds.

Other Members, particularly those from different parts of this city, have referred to the peace walls and the real divisions in their communities. As I have said before in the Chamber, I am from a farming family in the country. Where I come from, when a cow was sick during calving or somebody needed help with lambing a sheep, it did not matter what their background was. Nobody asked at the gate, "Where did you go on Sunday?". Everybody chipped in. That is still the situation at home. We need to see an increase in that and reflect on the fact that, although people may have different cultural practices, political beliefs and views about the constitutional position of the North of Ireland, that does not mean that they do not have the same worries and concerns. We all want to see the same thing for ourselves, our families, our friends and our constituents. We want to see people being able to have a full and proper life and to access healthcare. We all have the same struggles. At the end of the day, that is what life is about.

I congratulate the proposers of the motion. I hope to see it receive cross-party support. It is a good basis on which we can all work together for all the people whom we represent.

**Mr Honeyford:** I have said before in the Chamber that I probably would not be here were it not for my community involvement, particularly in local sports clubs in Lagan Valley. I stand as a proud development officer of Glenavy GAC. I do not come from a GAA background, nor does my wife or any of her family. Before Matthew O'Toole left the Chamber, he talked about getting real, but I want to look at some of the things that happened around me and what it looks like when you do life together and change mindsets.

My late granny was called Sally. She was pretty loyal. She was from Ballysillan. She owned a chip shop on the Shankill Road, and, when I was young, she used to take me to the band parades. My granny moved to Bangor when she got older, and, at the end, she lived in the Fold. Her flat was full of plates of the royals and royal weddings. In case anybody did not realise what her beliefs were, she had a little Union Jack clock on her mantelpiece that ticked as loudly as she could speak. Everybody knew exactly where Sally came from. Sundays were a complete day of rest: you did nothing on a Sunday in her house. You did not wash the car or cut the grass; that was completely frowned upon.

When my son — her first great-grandson — was about seven or eight, he was playing in the Sunday Go games at our club, St Joseph's. We

were to visit my granny on that afternoon. When he came home from the Go Games, I told him to get changed so that he would not cause her any offence. Unknown to me, he had simply thrown an Irish rugby hoodie over his GAA top. My granny was getting old, and her flat was really warm all the time, so, when we arrived there, Tim was too warm. He took off his fleece, and his GAA top was underneath: two sports, two Irish teams and a completely different reaction. My granny was 90-ish at the time, but, as quick as a flash, she saw the GAA logo. I remember seeing the speed at which her eyes locked on that badge. Here is the thing: this was her blue-eyed boy, and he was wearing a GAA shirt. I will never forget what happened and how that challenged her view and how her reaction was instantly different because this was her family and her great-grandson. I am not saying that her opinion completely changed or reversed, but her opposition certainly did, and her perception was completely challenged and was transformed. Her opinion was never going to be challenged by words, press releases, Photoshop images or Facebook posts or by a shared trip or visit somewhere where you do not know where anyone is from. What challenged her was her great-grandson living out a completely different way of life, uncomfortable, right up close and personal.

While photo opportunities are good for building confidence in this place — I am not dismissing that, because it is important that that happens — hard decisions are needed to help challenge, to integrate and to unite people.

**Ms Armstrong:** I thank the Member for giving way. Your story about your grandmother brings me back to our code of conduct. As MLAs, we are supposed to promote good relations. The motion gives us an opportunity to show the public that, as an Assembly, we are coming together in a way that is conducive to promoting good relations by tackling prejudice, promoting understanding and respect and encouraging participation.

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

**Mr Honeyford:** I thank Kellie for her words.

If we want to live in a place that thrives and prospers and celebrates diversity for everyone on this small island, we need more than words and photographs. We need decisions that will build and bring our community together. Nor should we settle for second best or some sort of false pretence. We can never settle for dividing out or trying to pretend that dividing out is

sharing. If we want to have a prosperous future, we need to share a model of confidence and integration that helps to bring people together so that they can do life together.

Twenty-six years after the Good Friday Agreement was signed, we need to make decisions to deliver prosperity. When I say prosperity, I do not mean money, wealth or foreign direct investment, although those are part of it. It is about starting to look at the man in the mirror, looking at ourselves and making decisions that provide opportunities that build on the work already being done across our community to change and challenge ourselves. We urgently need a strategic framework that will work to deliver a shared future and deliver on public-sector reform to tackle the cost of division while building on the good relations work that is already happening in our community. Talk and words are no longer anywhere near good enough.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I support the motion and commend those who tabled it. It has been a real privilege to listen to David's personal testimony, because that is where it all happens: it happens with love and with sharing our community. I also enjoyed the poem that Mike mentioned — I have just downloaded it. It is very good, and it teaches us all something about our humanity as well.

**1.45 pm**

This is a timely and appropriate motion about one of the most pressing challenges facing our society, namely the unacceptable division that still separates our communities in Northern Ireland. When our peace agreement was finalised in 1998, it was done so in the hope of a better future for everyone here. That was the real and earnest desire of those who took part in the negotiations. Twenty-six years later, although that fragile peace has survived, I think that we can all agree that our society has not lived up to the vision of the peacebuilders from all those years ago.

It is, of course, right to say that there are increasing numbers of people from all backgrounds who are engaging in forms of sport and culture that were once thought of as being reserved for the so-called opposite community. That is to be welcomed, and, through a combination of natural integration and the fact that more and more people are simply fed up with division, many are living lives in our communities that would have seemed unimaginable just a few decades ago. The old divisions no longer hold as true as they once

did, and we can all see that our society is changing around us. That includes the fact that we are home to an increasing number of new communities from around the world. That diversity is to be celebrated, and it is a sign of a Northern Ireland that now looks different from its past.

It is, however, also right to recognise that, in far too many of our communities and for far too many of our people, the scars of past and present division are still very clear. Reconciliation was never supposed to be an event that happened in 1998 but rather a process that was to continue throughout the years that followed. Despite the huge popular support for integration, we still know that it is not the reality on the ground. Lip service has been paid to integrated education, but, let us be honest, we are fooling nobody. Only 7% of our young people are enrolled in integrated schools. The vast majority of children still grow up without the opportunity to experience an environment that is unlike their own, and although integrated education should be high on the agenda, in practice, at least 10 of our integrated schools have lost their funding in the funding deal to restore these institutions.

More than 44% of people here say that relationships between Protestants and Catholics are about the same as they were five years ago, and 58% of people, from different religions, have said that they use different local services either a little or a lot of the time. Those failures of integration are the consequences of the failure to tackle properly divisions in our communities and in our society. Structural segregation is still the norm in far too many areas of our lives, and we know from research that the divided education system here alone costs £226 million every single year. Tackling those costs of division may be framed by some as another pressure on budgets that are already under huge pressure, but we must recognise that the kind of shared framework that the motion calls for is an investment in the future that we all want to see. We need to recognise that, every day, the running of parallel services in different communities costs our public purse. The cost of division is profound.

It is, however, also important to recognise the cost of division between the North and South of this island. Running parallel services between North and South also holds back our community and our economy. There are therefore two barriers, and the cost of division from them needs to be addressed. The first is the barrier between the people here in schools, in housing and in public services. The second is

the barrier between the people, North and South, and they are not mutually exclusive. We can both reconcile our communities here and reconcile the people of this island.

Finally, although the motion calls for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to introduce the —

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

**Ms McLaughlin:** — required strategic framework, breaking down the barriers of segregation and sectarianism is every Minister's responsibility.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** That concludes the list of Members to speak. It is now my duty to call the deputy First Minister to respond. The deputy First Minister will have the allocated 15 minutes, but, hopefully, she will understand if I have to apologetically interrupt her for the start of Question Time at 2.00 pm.

**Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First Minister):** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will try to speak very quickly.

I am grateful to be afforded the opportunity to respond to the motion. First, I offer my apologies for being late for the beginning of the debate and for missing Ms Bradshaw's contribution. I was at the North/South Ministerial Council. We tried to get here as quickly as we could, but, unfortunately, we were late.

We should never underestimate or minimise the challenges involved in building a truly reconciled future, but I want to start on a positive note by recognising the incredible work that many thousands of organisations, people, workers, youth workers, churches, teachers and schools do in the area of building good relations. It really is incredible. I have had the huge privilege of getting out there and speaking to the many people who deliver those projects, sometimes on behalf of the Executive Office, on behalf of the Peace programmes or other external funds, or with a combination of funding from councils and Departments. It really is incredible. They are doing the work on the coal face, sometimes with the hardest to reach young people and communities, and really producing fabulous and fantastic results. I want to recognise that and recognise how far we have come, and I will get to some of the figures arising out of the key Together: Building a United Community actions.



This is an area that I am deeply passionate about. I worked in it for many years. As a special adviser, I had the great privilege of being the policy lead on good relations and had a key role in drafting and supporting the production of 'Together: Building a United Community'. In particular, working hand in hand with officials —

**Ms Bradshaw:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** I will in a moment.

Working hand in hand with officials, we were able to create the signature projects that have now been rolled out. The T:BUC strategy is under review, and we will, of course, be moving to develop it further.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I thank the deputy First Minister for giving way. Minister, do you agree that, while those programmes have been effective — my background is in community development as well, so I recognise the good work — the motion is about embedding good relations and a shared future in all our Departments, not just in a stand-alone programme in the Executive Office?

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** Absolutely, and T:BUC is not a stand-alone project. To make that absolutely clear, one of our signature projects, for example, was the removal of peace walls. That fell to DOJ, which, then, had an Alliance Minister. It was difficult, I have to say, to get the Department to take it on at that time. The point, which I made directly to the Minister at the time, is that good relations is not only an Executive Office — then OFMDFM — matter. The section 75 duty is on each and every one of us and all public bodies; it is not just a departmental matter. The section 75(2) duty is a separable one and a wide one, and it needs to be recognised by all our public bodies.

That said, division, poor relations and lack of acceptance and tolerance all bring costs to our society. They limit potential and hold us back from thriving as individuals and as a society. There are many issues in this space, however, on which we agree. We all want our children and young people to grow up safely and with equal opportunity to achieve their full potential. We want them to be free to embrace and express their own culture while being respectful and tolerant of the culture of others.

I am deeply proud of who I am. I always say that culture is not something that I do; it is something that I am. It is about going to the things that express my identity, enjoying the

music and the traditions, learning about history and celebrating my identity. A sense of identity and cultural aspects enriches us as individuals, enriches our families and enriches our communities, and it should be celebrated. While I am deeply proud and confident of who I am, and I want to share that cultural identity with others, I also recognise that I ought to and must give that respect to others. It does not take away from who I am, what my identity is or what my heritage and history are to give that respect to others. Likewise, I demand that respect from others.

Those agreed principles formed the basis of the Together: Building a United Community strategy, also known as T:BUC, which was published in May 2013. It was significant that, as referenced by Sinéad McLaughlin, from 1998 and the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the institutions here had failed to produce a good relations strategy. It was very difficult to get consensus on that across the parties. In 2007, upon the restoration of the Assembly, there was a keenness from the Ministers in the then OFMDFM to get together and produce the first good relations strategy for Northern Ireland. We had the shared future strategy, and you will be aware that there were criticisms of it. I liked Mike Nesbitt's reference to the big human blender: there was a sense that everything would be thrown in and that what would come out would be beige, and that, in order to get on, we would need to strip away who we are and hide our identities. The Together: Building a United Community strategy marked a significant change in that regard: it contained a sense of respect for the celebration of those identities.

I am deeply proud of what we were able to achieve.

**A Member:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mrs Little-Pengelly:** I am very conscious of time. Unfortunately, Question Time is at 2.00 pm.

I am really proud of what the Together: Building a United Community strategy has achieved. I am not scared to say that, at times, I feel very emotional when I see the incredible benefit and change that it has brought about. Thirty thousand young people have taken part in more than 900 T:BUC camps. Look at how many of those young people have had robust and enduring relationships beyond that programme. That is the legacy of T:BUC.

Some Members said that just having photo ops and getting out there and sending out a positive

message is not good enough. I absolutely agree that that is not good enough: we want to deliver. T:BUC has delivered. When I speak to young people about what I am proudest of in politics, I tell them that it is the work that I did in that area. It is about the lives that have been changed through that programme, and the resulting relationships and greater understanding across divides. I want us to get to the position where we no longer talk about friendships, relationships and understanding across the divide. We need to just talk about those friendships in a Northern Ireland where our differences are celebrated, and where they can be a strength. That is not something to be intimidated by: our cultural identities here should be celebrated and respected across all aspects, new and old.

Other achievements include the establishment of five Urban Villages areas; the building of 2,500 shared homes; 27,000 people taking part in the Uniting Communities programme of sport and creative events; and 7,800 young people participating in the United Youth programme. I could go on. Reference was made to the Limavady shared education campus. That was not a photo call about digging up some ground. It was a celebration of what has been achieved. I sat in that hall and saw young people who were so proud of who they are and their traditions, coming together and respecting each other. That is the very manifestation of what we, as an Executive, need to do, which is to deliver on building the brighter and united shared future that I know that we can have. It is not about denying who we are. It is about celebration through real actions, based on evidence, and making a meaningful change in people's lives.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I thank the deputy First Minister for that response and the timeliness of it. Members, the debate will resume after Question Time, with Kate Nicholl making her winding-up speech. Please take your ease. Question Time will begin shortly, after a change at the top Table.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*(Mr Speaker [Mr Poots] in the Chair)*

2.00 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### The Executive Office

**Mr Speaker:** I call Maurice Bradley.

**Mr Bradley:** Mr Speaker, may I apologise for not being in the House prior to the Easter break for a question to the Principal Deputy Speaker?

### High Street Task Force: Update

1. **Mr Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the implementation of the high street task force report 'Delivering a 21st Century High Street'. (AQO 205/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister):** A Cheann Comhairle, with your permission, junior Minister Reilly will answer that question.

**Miss Reilly (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):** High streets are at the heart of our society in more ways than one. Not only do they drive the economy but they create shared spaces where society thrives. The task force report was published in March 2022, and, at that time, former junior Ministers paid tribute to the work that the task force did and welcomed the strategic narrative. The recommendations will be of interest to a number of Departments, and we will shortly write to Executive colleagues inviting them to consider how they will take forward the findings of the report.

**Mr Bradley:** I thank the junior Minister very much for that answer. My town of Coleraine has lost Marks and Sparks to out-of-town shopping, and, since that, our footfall has dropped by 14%. Are there any plans for the high street task force to try to reverse the trend of shops in town centres going to out-of-town shopping centres?

**Miss Reilly:** I thank the Member for his question. Yes, the high streets rely massively on local businesses and local footfall; we rely on people going on to the high streets. The Member mentioned the bigger companies. Unfortunately, that is where society is going, but, of course, we want to support town centres and to see more people going into them. We want to see people shopping local. We

absolutely encourage more people to go into town centres.

**Miss Brogan:** Will the Minister outline what support has been given to the high street traders that were affected by the severe flooding recently, le do thoil [*Translation: please*]?

**Miss Reilly:** It was, of course, heartbreaking, to see so many family businesses and people who have built up their trade over generations lose so much after the recent floods. Those small and medium-sized businesses are the lifeblood of our local town centres. A number of steps have been taken to help them overcome the impacts of the devastating floods. Under the flood damage business grant scheme, 143 eligible businesses across three affected council areas were paid £7,500 each before 15 December at a total cost of £1,072,500. On 21 December, the Civil Service further announced details of financial support for businesses that were severely affected by the flooding. That will be targeted at small and medium-sized businesses. The support will be linked to the actual costs that were incurred by businesses for the replacement of damaged or destroyed equipment, refitting flooded property and repairing damage to buildings. Subject to meeting relevant criteria, businesses will also receive 100% relief from non-domestic rates on flooded properties for the period between 29 October 2023 and 31 March 2024. The Department for the Economy, led by my colleague Conor Murphy, is in discussions with the local authorities over the delivery of additional support — that is up to £100,000 per business — so I urge any trader who believes that they may be eligible to check the criteria and submit an application.

**Ms Bradshaw:** What budget exists for a high street and challenge fund in line with recommendations 3 and 9 of the report?

**Miss Reilly:** I thank the Member for her question. First, we agree with the principles of the recommendations in the report that were brought forward at the time. We firmly believe that high streets must be supported. However, a more detailed consideration of the task force recommendations and how we bring them forward, as well as any impacts that have been felt since the report was published, such as the cost-of-living crisis and the budgetary position developments in place-based working, will be a matter for the Executive to consider.

## USA Visit, March 2024

2. **Ms Brownlee** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their engagements in the United States of America in March 2024. (AQO 206/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** The deputy First Minister and I travelled to Washington DC for a series of St Patrick's Day engagements. We travelled from 13 to 17 March. We represented the four-party coalition of the Executive and their shared objectives as part of that engagement. It was our first international visit and an important opportunity to consolidate the strong relationship that our region enjoys with the US. That relationship was crucial to our peace process and continues today through investment, knowledge sharing and support. We continue to have access at the highest levels in the US, including a meeting with President Biden at the White House, to deliver a clear message that the Government here are back up and running. It is vital that we seek every opportunity to attract investment, grow our economy and deliver for our citizens.

Our visit focused on showcasing our local economy as a compelling investment opportunity and highlighting the many benefits of doing business here. We were also able to deliver those messages at key events such as the Ireland Funds event, the bureau breakfast and the special envoy's event. As well as having the round-table discussion with the US Chamber of Commerce and business leaders, events such as the Speaker of the House of Representatives luncheon and our fireside chat at Georgetown University, we had receptions hosted by both the British and Irish ambassadors to the US. That all gave us huge opportunities to further our engagements with some of the most influential decision makers so that they, too, can see the potential that we have to offer.

**Ms Brownlee:** Thank you for the update. I welcome the positive announcement about the huge investment of the in-kind donation from the US computer software company Alteryx. How confident is the First Minister that we can build upon that fantastic, positive news for Northern Ireland?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The Member referenced one of the companies that has chosen to invest here, which is really positive. I can tell the House that the whole four to five days that we were there were hugely beneficial for us. There was huge goodwill. The Chair of the Executive Office Committee was there also, as were the Education Minister, the Economy Minister and the Speaker. We took every platform and

engagement open to us to sell our wares, as I described it.

On the investment potential that we have, sometimes those things do not come overnight. It is inevitable that you have to build diplomatic relationships and, equally, alongside that, economic opportunities. We were all on message in saying that we are open for business, that we have a unique selling point in terms of dual market access, that we have a young workforce and that we have a happy population, believe it or not — you would not believe that sometimes when you hear the media headlines. We had lots of really positive things to say. Given that we are such a small, outward-looking economy, it is really important, if we are to fulfil and reach our potential in terms of investing in the people whom we serve, that we take those opportunities. Our key message the whole way through was that it is about prosperity for our people.

I look forward to further engagements to follow up on the linkages that we made, including a visit from Joe Kennedy, I think, next week. That will be about furthering other opportunities and potentially having a future investment opportunity and perhaps even an advising delegation again. There will be further opportunities for us to go back again in order to follow up on some of those things.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Will the First Minister list any further investments that were secured as a result of her engagements in the US? We have heard of one. Are there others in the pipeline? Is it a strong pipeline?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes. The opportunity that we had six or seven weeks into a re-formed Executive was huge. As I said, the positivity was fantastic, not just from investors. We were there to say that we are open for business. I believe that there will be a lot more to come in the pipeline. The investment did not come just as a result of that visit a few weeks ago. That obviously furthered relations that were built. We had the investment conference and the Joe Kennedy delegation previous to that. It is exactly like a pipeline: it takes time to progress all those things. As I said, if we are to fulfil our ambition for our people and make this a more prosperous part of the world, we have to follow through on them. I am quite positive about what we can achieve.

It was important on the economic front. It was important for diplomatic relations. It was also important for philanthropy and looking towards other funds that are there that want to help us to deliver the things that we want to deliver

here, particularly given the financial outlook that we have from our budget allocation. I suspect that, over time, we will hear many more positive announcements.

The deputy First Minister and I are determined to continue that work, as is our Economy Minister, who is determined to work with Invest NI, Enterprise Ireland and InterTradeIreland. Let us scope out massively all the opportunities that we have and make sure that we achieve better jobs, better-paid jobs and more jobs for the people whom we all serve.

**Mr McNulty:** With the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people, what representations did you make to the powers that be in the United States to call for a ceasefire and for humanitarian aid for the impoverished people of Palestine, who are being slaughtered?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I absolutely concur with the Member about what is happening to the people of Palestine. The genocide must end, and it must end now. Six months on, it is harrowing to watch the scenes. The people in that region need support, an urgent ceasefire, humanitarian aid and a political solution. I, personally, took the opportunity, on two occasions, to say that directly to the President of the United States. We know that the United States has been a firm friend to the Irish peace process and helped us to achieve everything that we achieved 25 years ago. I asked that the same approach be applied to the Middle East to achieve an immediate ceasefire. I took two opportunities; it was a platform not to be missed to call for an immediate ceasefire on behalf of the people of Palestine. I took every opportunity that I had to do that.

## Central Good Relations Fund

3. **Mr Easton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what measures are in place to ensure that the central good relations fund is distributed to groups across all constituencies. (AQO 207/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Reilly will answer the question.

**Miss Reilly:** The central good relations fund (CGRF) is an annual merit-based programme designed to deliver and support projects in areas where there is good relations need. Funding is awarded, subject to budget, to those groups that score highest in the assessment process. Welcome statements are used to identify particular thematic or geographic areas from which applications would be welcomed.

In 2023-24, we funded projects across all council areas to the great benefit of communities and the people who live here. Unfortunately, though, due to the challenging financial position of 2023-24, difficult decisions had to be made, which included cuts to the central good relations fund. That resulted in many worthy projects being unable to secure funding through CGRF. We commend the ongoing efforts of groups in the community and voluntary sector that work tirelessly to improve the lives of people here, especially when times are challenging.

Central good relations fund applications for 2024-25 are under assessment, and that process will be completed before the end of April 2024. Letters of offer will be issued to successful projects after a budget for the 2024-25 programme has been confirmed.

**Mr Easton:** I thank the junior Minister for her answer. How will the Department ensure that the good relations fund addresses the specific needs and challenges faced by marginalised communities, particularly women, who often bear the brunt of economic disparities and a lack of resources?

**Miss Reilly:** Good relations impacts are measured at a project level by looking at the challenges for those from a different background in participating in good relations projects; such challenges may come in the knowledge of and attitudes and behaviour towards those people. It is also done through funded stakeholder project reports, which often detail case studies that highlight the personal impacts of good relations participation. More broadly, independent evaluations are conducted to assess impact and inform future delivery. Officials continue to work with key stakeholders to improve and review the evaluation process and fully capture the positive impacts of good relations work.

**Mr Gildernew:** Can the Minister provide an update on delivery of the Together: Building a United Community strategy?

**Miss Reilly:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a cheiste. [*Translation: I thank the Member for his question.*] There has been significant progress in delivery of the Together: Building a United Community strategy since its implementation. Over 30,000 young people have taken part in 870 T:BUC camps, five Urban Villages areas have been established, and the target of building 10 shared neighbourhoods has been met. Over 27,000 participants took part in the Uniting

Communities programme of sporting events and young leader training, and over 6,000 young people participated in the United Youth programme. The first shared education campus at Limavady is now operational, and work is expected to commence on the Ballycastle shared education campus soon. The Executive have also expressed their commitment to the Strule campus in Omagh.

Approximately one third of interface barriers have been removed, with a further one third reduced in stature. Work continues across other interface sites to secure the conditions needed for reduction or removal. In recent weeks, junior Minister Cameron and I have attended good relations events in Derry, Newry, Ballymena, Newtownabbey and Belfast. All those Connecting Communities engagements are further evidence that the T:BUC strategy has facilitated meaningful progress and change at a local level.

I commend the efforts of all the community and statutory partners involved in working to build a better future for all. I also acknowledge all the participants from the community and voluntary sector — the volunteers and staff involved in those programmes — who go out and do tremendous work, making a difference to the people who not only need the programmes but benefit from them massively. I commend all of them for that.

2.15 pm

**Mr O'Toole:** Does the junior Minister agree that, notwithstanding all the good work and good relations that you mentioned, the Executive's decision not to put back the ring fence for integrated schools, effectively colluding with the UK Government to remove that funding from integrated schools, damages the good relations agenda?

**Miss Reilly:** We are all aware that, with the Executive restored just over eight weeks ago, we are in a difficult budgetary situation. We know that we are underfunded. As I said, the Executive encountered a challenging Budget position for 2023-24, and difficult decisions had to be made. To inform the decision-making process and how the budget was allocated, an equality impact assessment (EQIA) was carried out. Initial feedback received from that EQIA's public consultation was considered, and an allocation of £1.4 million was made to the central good relations fund. In addition to the EQIA, a children's rights impact assessment and a rural needs impact assessment were undertaken. We understand the impact that

those reductions had on local communities and want to be clear that we remain fully supportive of good relations delivery.

**Mr Speaker:** Question 4 has been withdrawn.

## **Executive Office: Strategic Priorities**

5. **Ms Flynn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their strategic priorities. (AQO 209/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** We have spoken previously about our key priorities, including childcare, reducing hospital waiting lists, tackling violence against women and girls, special educational needs, Lough Neagh, housing and developing a globally competitive economy. A considerable amount of other work is also under way. The Executive's most immediate priority remains the stabilisation of public finances. It is important to us that everyone in our society feels the benefits of the decisions that we make. Work is moving at pace to develop a new Programme for Government, with plans for a fully agreed Programme for Government to be in place for the summer. We will provide an update to the Assembly in due course, and, of course, the Assembly will have an opportunity to discuss that.

**Ms Flynn:** I thank the First Minister for her answer and welcome the clear commitment to improved childcare provision for families in the North. Does the Minister agree that that provision must be affordable for parents and families and that any childcare solution that we look at needs to be bespoke and suit every family? Does the Minister agree about the importance of affordability?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Absolutely. I am pleased to say that, collectively, the four parties around the Executive table have prioritised the issue of affordable childcare. Whilst we all might have slightly different approaches to policy, work is under way to find an agreed way forward.

As the Member reflected, childcare costs are far too high and unaffordable, and places are not available in many areas. That is at a time when families are already stretched by the cost-of-living crisis and all the additional costs that people face. The provision of affordable and accessible childcare is key to ensuring that all our young people get the best start in life. That will also allow more people to participate in the workforce. That is a consistent and clear message that the deputy First Minister and I have heard. We have been visiting childcare settings such as Kinderkids at the Ashton

Centre and Shankill Women's Centre in north Belfast. We recognise, as, I believe, everybody does, that investing in childcare is a long-term funding programme and we need to commit to that. That is why we have taken the issue of the financial situation directly to the Prime Minister, because the current financial package limits our ability to do the things that we want to do.

I am committed to working with the Education Minister. The Education Minister focused on the issue in the United States. Again, we are looking towards areas with good examples and good practice and ways of doing things. Any childcare strategy has to provide high-quality childcare, making it affordable for parents and providing sustainability for the workforce, which is predominantly female. That is what families are looking to the new Executive to do, and I hope that we can make it a real and meaningful project that we deliver in this mandate.

**Mr Allister:** Do victims' issues feature in the strategic priorities? If so, why does the First Minister, although deploying weasel words about regretting all deaths, persistently refuse, thereby insulting IRA victims, to condemn Provisional IRA murders, including those recently highlighted in the Kenova report? Were those murders wrong?

**Mrs O'Neill:** As I said in the aftermath of the Kenova report and on taking up the office of First Minister, I regret every single loss of life. I regret that people were born into a society in which conflict was all around them. Our job, as political leaders, is to try to help to heal the wounds of the past. Our job, as political leaders, is to try to help to look towards the future and help families to move forward: not to move on but to move forward. That is the responsible, pragmatic and mature thing to do.

**Mr McGrath:** It is welcome to hear that the Programme for Government on which the Executive parties have been working for over a year will be published in the summer. Given that it is required to be consulted on, will the First Minister give a commitment that it will be published before the summer recess to give people the opportunity to assess it over the summer?

**Mrs O'Neill:** To confirm and maybe correct the record for the Member, the Executive have been formed for nine or 10 weeks now. That is how long we have been having the official conversation on the Programme for Government. I am glad to say that work continues apace to develop that Programme for Government. I am more interested in getting it

right. I am more interested in making sure that we have a Programme for Government that reflects our priorities, as identified by the four Executive parties. I have said that we will bring this to the Executive. We will have some discussion this week, but the intention is that we will have something formally in place for the summer. We will then have to go through the consultation process and work through all the details. Let us get it right. Let us not be in a hurry. Let us make sure that it is meaningful and impactful.

## Housing: Refugees

6. **Ms Nicholl** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what engagement they have had in relation to the provision of housing for refugees in the past 12 months. (AQO 210/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** The provision of housing, including for those granted refugee status, is the responsibility of the Housing Executive. Following the introduction of the Home Office's streamlined asylum process, the pace and volume of asylum decisions has increased significantly. Whilst we welcome work to reduce the backlog and facilitate the decision-making process, the increase in so-called move-ons, where people move out of Home Office accommodation into, for example, a Housing Executive property, continues to have a significant impact on services and support locally, including on housing. TEO officials have a coordination role and engage regularly at regional and local level on the issue. A multi-agency move-on coordination group, which includes members from TEO, the Housing Executive, the Department of Education, the Department of Health, the Department for Communities and the Education Authority, continues to meet fortnightly to coordinate the devolved response. We also engage through the move-on delivery board, which is chaired by the Home Office and attended by TEO and Housing Executive officials, alongside a range of stakeholders from across the regions.

**Ms Nicholl:** I thank the First Minister for her answer. Does she agree that, while housing is the responsibility of the Housing Executive, integration is very much her Department's responsibility? While the work being done in TEO is welcome, there are issues with the governance, and people are falling through the gaps, specifically children who have been in Mears housing. They get moved to a different school because they have gone into Housing Executive accommodation, before finally getting their house. It is incredibly disruptive and is

impacting on integration, and more needs to be done about that.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I concur with the issues that the Member has raised. It is really important for governance that we listen to people who are living through that experience, especially to those on the ground who are helping them every day. I welcome the work that is being done, but I also recognise that there is more to be done. While it is not a devolved issue per se, some issues fall into our responsibility, so we have to make sure that we do the right things. That is why I welcome the fact that we plan to bring a final refugee integration strategy to the Executive in the coming months. Work has been going on to align the draft strategy to make sure that we enhance the support for refugees and asylum seekers. No doubt we will want to talk about that more in the time ahead. That also includes making sure that we have the right governance structures in place. I welcome the fact that we now have more stakeholder engagement and that more people are able to bring their issues of concern to the table. We then discuss the issues and work out how we can lobby on them. We should always have an open mind over whether something is not right and then try to fix it. That is the approach that we take in TEO.

**Ms Sheerin:** First Minister, will you provide an update on the support for people who are avoiding the war in Ukraine?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, absolutely. We continue to play our part in supporting Ukrainians who are fleeing war. There have been over 3,100 arrivals here so far, and more than £620,000 has been paid in immediate cash support to help people to get established. We have coordinated work across Departments to support arrivals and facilitated payments of over £3 million to more than 900 individual homes, the people who have opened their doors to help and be Ukrainians' sponsors. We are also mindful that some of our first arrivals under the Homes for Ukraine sponsorship scheme are entering the final year of their current visa and that that is a worrying moment for people. We therefore welcome the announcement by the Home Office on 19 February confirming the opportunity to apply for an extended Homes for Ukraine visa, for a further 18 months, for those who wish to remain. As with all such matters, given that the policy responsibility sits in London, we will continue to engage with the Home Office in London and the Department for Levelling Up on work to support Ukrainian arrivals.

**Mr Kingston:** What impact has the Illegal Migration Act 2023 had, and what engagement has the Executive Office had with the Home Office on it?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Given that it has not come into full effect yet, we are still working out the implications for here. We have to continue that work with the Home Office as more of what the legislation means for our responsibilities and what falls to us becomes clearer. Certainly, even though the Act came into effect in July of last year, most of the sections have not been commenced yet, so we need to get more detail on what it will mean. We continue to liaise with the Home Office on its plans to enact the remaining sections and what the implications are. We have established a task and finish group chaired by TEO officials to take that work forward.

**Mr Speaker:** Question 7 has been withdrawn.

## Commissioner for Victims and Survivors

8. **Mr Donnelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the administrative preparations are complete for the appointment of a Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. (AQO 212/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Ensuring that the needs of victims and survivors continue to be met in the most effective and appropriate manner remains a key priority for the Executive. The role of the commissioner is critical in supporting that work, by ensuring that victims and survivors have a strong and independent voice and contributing to the development of policy so that their longer-term needs are addressed. We are therefore keen that a new commissioner is appointed as soon as possible, and our officials continue to progress the administrative preparations required for the recruitment competition to appoint the new commissioner. The appointment process is regulated by the Commissioner for Public Appointments (CPANI), and we estimate that the whole process will take approximately six months.

**Mr Donnelly:** The Minister has just answered my supplementary. Thank you, Minister; I appreciate it.

**Mrs Dillon:** I thank the First Minister for her responses so far. Will she provide an update on when a new chair and members will be appointed to the board of the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS)?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The current board's second term ended on 31 March 2024. Along with a board member, officials are considering interim arrangements should the chair position be vacant for a period of time. A competition to fill the vacancies was launched on 15 January and closed to applications on 2 February. Although the VSS is not a regulated body under the CPANI guidelines, the appointment process is being undertaken in the spirit of the code. It is hoped that the new chair and members will be announced very shortly.

## US Investment

9. **Mr Harvey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of their Department to attract investment from new US businesses. (AQO 213/22-27)

10. **Mr Robinson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their key message to potential investors during their visit to Washington DC. (AQO 214/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** With your permission, I will answer questions 9 and 10 together.

The deputy First Minister and I travelled to Washington to represent the four-party Executive and their shared objectives. The US represents enormous opportunities for us. It remains our largest and most important source of inward foreign direct investment. Some 260 US-owned businesses operate here, and they employ over 30,000 people, which shows the potential that is there to be built on. Our decision to travel to the US at the earliest opportunity was to seek out investors and companies and to demonstrate that we are, in fact, open for business and committed to building stability and prosperity through investment.

The deputy First Minister and I had a very positive experience, meeting business leaders from a wide range of sectors who were left with a very clear understanding of why they should invest here.

## 2.30 pm

We used our engagements in Washington to deliver a clear message that we are an attractive investment opportunity for global companies because of our talented workforce, dual market access with the EU and innovative home-grown companies. We highlighted our strengths, particularly in sectors such as cybersecurity, regtech, fintech, advanced manufacturing and health sciences, and we



highlighted our young, skilled and dedicated workforce. We also impressed upon President Biden that we appreciate the continued support, including the work taken forward by special envoy Joe Kennedy III. Over the coming months, we will continue to build on the connections that we have made in order to grow our economy for the betterment of our citizens.

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

## Programme for Government

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the issues raised in the motions that have been debated, including many tabled by her party, since the Assembly's return, on topics such as making affordable childcare available, ending violence against women and girls, making school uniforms more affordable and addressing workers' rights, many of which, on issue of the Order Paper, were heavily publicised, will be legislated for, with financial commitments, in a new Programme for Government, given that the First Minister said earlier that she hopes that a Programme for Government will be ready for delivery at some point in the summer. (AQT 131/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member, who recently wrote to the deputy First Minister and me about some of those issues. As I said earlier, I can confirm that we are working at pace through the Programme for Government. We want to get it right, and it will include the priorities that I identified previously, some of which you just noted. It is important that we deliver on what we say we will deliver and that we understand the financial context in which we are working, so that is why, ideally, we want to get to a point where we have a Programme for Government that is aligned with a multi-year Budget. That is, of course, where everybody wants to be. Unfortunately, we are dealing with the confines of the current Treasury rules, but who knows where that will be in the future. For now, the Executive's focus is on the Programme for Government, and, of course, the Executive parties all have collective ownership of that. It needs to reflect the shared priorities of the Executive, some of which, as I said, you just referred to. We are working on a draft document, and that will include the list of priorities. We will move at pace, and I will write to the Member to follow up on the letter that he previously sent.

**Mr O'Toole:** Thank you, First Minister. On a separate but related issue, just before recess, in a written ministerial statement that was not delivered orally to the Assembly, the Minister of Education appointed the serving Justice Department permanent secretary to be chief executive of the Education Authority. He has confirmed to me in a written answer that there was no internal trawl. It appears that that appointment did not follow the updated guidance outlined in the renewable heat incentive inquiry recommendations.

**Mr Speaker:** Get to a question, Mr O'Toole, or we will not be taking the question.

**Mr O'Toole:** Did the First Minister know about that appointment beforehand, and does she support it?

**Mrs O'Neill:** First, neither the deputy First Minister nor I had any role in the appointment process. That is a matter for HR and internal practices, and it is a matter for the Education Minister, so I encourage the Member to direct his questions that way.

## North/South Ministerial Council

T2. **Ms Kimmins** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after welcoming this morning's meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in Armagh, the first since 2021, whether the First Minister agrees that the NSMC is a core component of the Good Friday Agreement. (AQT 132/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thanks to the Member for that. Yes, it is a really important part of the jigsaw. Now that we have the Executive up and functioning, our Assembly is meeting and we are discussing the matters of the day, it is also important that we get all pieces of the jigsaw put back together, and that includes the North/South Ministerial Council.

I am very glad that we had our first meeting in three years this morning. The meeting ran on because we had quite a lot to talk about. Our people are best served when all the institutions and all the apparatus of the Good Friday Agreement are working, and that includes on a North/South and east-west basis. We have had our Executive restored, had a North/South Ministerial Council meeting, and we will have a British-Irish Council meeting in June. This morning was very much a positive statement on all the areas of collaboration that we have. I will not get into lists and everything because I will leave something out, but we discussed everything, including infrastructure projects

such as the A5 and the Ulster canal. We talked about how we will work together across health and education. We talked about childcare and quite a range of areas. To me, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the establishment of North/South bodies, this is a good opportunity for a refresh of all those areas of collaboration.

**Ms Kimmins:** I thank the First Minister for her answer. Based on that, can the First Minister give her assessment of the huge potential coming out of today's meeting and what progress we may see in the time ahead?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I kind of stole your thunder by moving on to that in my previous answer. It was a good and productive meeting. It is good to get the Council back in place. It is an important part of the Good Friday Agreement, and its whole focus is on delivery and the key projects and areas that we have identified across, as I said, health, education and the economy. All Ministers are now going to go off into their sectoral formats and will meet for discussions across their specific areas of interest. I look forward to making progress. As we work collectively through the institutions, we can do good things by building a better future for the people who live across the island, particularly in those areas of collaboration and in those where we can work in partnership.

### **Mother-and-baby Homes Inquiry: Legislation**

T3. **Ms Eastwood** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the legislation for an inquiry into mother-and-baby homes. (AQT 133/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thank you for that question. We are continuing to work our way through that. We will bring our legislative programme to the Executive in the coming weeks. The inquiry is one of the areas that falls under my Department's remit. I am certainly determined that we get the legislation over the line as quickly as possible, because those people have waited for far too long. We do not want any delays in getting us to the point where we can introduce and debate the legislation. I hope that we can do that and do it well.

I am meeting some people who have been advocates for all the change in relation to mother-and-baby homes that has happened over the past number of years and for the rightful recognition of all the wrong that was caused to them. I give them our assurances that we will bring the legislation forward as quickly as possible.

**Ms Eastwood:** I thank the First Minister for her response. I am anxious and keen to ensure that the inquiry includes protection for burial sites. Does she agree that that protection is especially urgent given the concerns around the ongoing work at Milltown Cemetery, which may be causing damage to the resting place of thousands, including, according to Amnesty International, potentially hundreds of babies from mother-and-baby homes?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I concur with that point. It is such a sensitive issue. People have waited decades for recognition of what happened. Thankfully, we have made some progress, but we certainly have more to do. I absolutely take on board your point about making sure that we protect burial places.

**Mr Speaker:** Question 4 has been withdrawn.

### **North/South Ministerial Council**

T5. **Mr Chambers** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the First Minister's assessment of the economic value of today's meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. (AQT 135/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for that question and congratulate him on his elevation to the Policing Board. I believe that that was announced earlier today.

There absolutely was economic value in that meeting. We live on a small island. The Economy Ministers and the Enterprise Ministers from both jurisdictions talked today about the opportunities to grow the all-island economy and the economies across our islands. There are huge opportunities for us to work collaboratively. The Economy Minister referenced today the opportunities for Invest NI to work with Enterprise Ireland and InterTradeIreland and how those organisations can work towards joint missions for economic opportunity and to create better prosperity. There are huge opportunities for us, and I am glad that we were able to discuss those at the North/South Ministerial Council this morning.

**Mr Chambers:** Thank you, Minister. Given the renewed cooperation on east-west issues, is the Minister confident that Northern Ireland's economy will benefit from those opportunities for dialogue regarding east-west and North/South trade?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, dialogue is the key to making everything work. The more conversations that

we have, the more joined-up we can be, particularly across the two islands. That will be to the mutual benefit of all the people whom we collectively serve. Prosperity, prosperity, prosperity: that is what we should all be focused on. We had a conversation earlier about shared societies and building shared communities. Let us lift everybody up. Bringing everybody up will create a better shared space for us all. There are huge opportunities in the time ahead. I hope that we all have the political will with which to grasp them. That political will was certainly evident this morning.

## Lough Neagh: Executive Commitment

T6. **Mrs Erskine** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what the Executive will do to ensure that the overflows that are affecting Lough Neagh are addressed, in light of their recent visit to the lough with the AERA Minister and the fact that the NI Water CEO told the Committee for Infrastructure that overflows are contributing to the issues at Lough Neagh. (AQT 136/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for her question. As she knows, the Executive have said that Lough Neagh is one of our priorities. We also know that, unfortunately, there is no quick fix. There will need to be investment and short, medium and longer-term plans. The fact that the deputy First Minister, the AERA Minister and I went on site last week to meet representatives of the Lough Neagh Partnership demonstrated the Executive's commitment to collectively take on the problems that we have. That situation will fall not to one Department but to many Departments, whether it is to do with waste water infrastructure, agricultural run-off, zebra mussels or, indeed, blue-green algae, which is a European and world-wide problem and not just a problem in Lough Neagh.

I hope that that gives some assurances that, whilst we move towards the environmental improvement plans that the AERA Minister will be bringing to the Executive and a Lough Neagh-specific plan — that will be for him to talk about in his own right — that is the volume of work that we are undertaking. Furthermore, previous to this morning's meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, the deputy First Minister and I had a conversation, which we then brought into the meeting, about the need to share innovation, research and experience around what is happening in Lough Neagh. As a result, there was an agreement to advance that piece of work. Perhaps something very

good will come from that to identify the problems and to share research, innovation and knowledge, which will be crucial.

**Mrs Erskine:** The protection of our waterways is, obviously, key to Lough Neagh. However, overflows are an issue in waterways across Northern Ireland, for example, in Lough Erne and the River Blackwater. Will the First Minister ensure that the protection of our waterways will be key in a Programme for Government?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes. I have said that we will prioritise Lough Neagh, but there are individual responsibilities that will fall to all our colleagues around the Executive table. We will let them bring their expertise and their skill set and their Executive papers, and we will not be found wanting in supporting us all to do whatever we can to arrest the current situation. The report has been published, and we know what the challenges are. The big challenge will be how we turn that around and fix the problem, given the financial constraints that we are under. That is why the financial argument is still, crucially, the number-one argument for us.

## EU Legislation: Timely Scrutiny

T7. **Mr Butler** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after congratulating them on the start that they have made in the Executive Office, to outline the steps that the Executive Office has taken to ensure pre-emptive and proactive scrutiny of all EU legislation, in a timely manner. (AQT 137/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** As the Member knows, we now have a Committee established, the remit of which will be to scrutinise all that work. It comes to us first, and we have a decision to make, and then it can come to the Floor of the House. This is a new arrangement for us all, and we are working our way through it. We have had two such debates in the Assembly so far. It is important that we work our way through those matters as they come before us, but we do not want to tie ourselves up constantly on those issues. Clearly, however, where there are issues of significance that we want to discuss, we have the forum now and should use it to discuss them.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the First Minister for her answer. Will the Executive Office be working to minimise further divergence with regard to UK-wide legislation as a methodology?

**Mrs O'Neill:** It is important that we work our way through that in a pragmatic sense and that

we take the needs of business into account. If Brexit is going to tell us anything, it is that, if we do not listen to the needs of people in industry who are challenged every day by the implications of the outworking of all that, we are not learning lessons. I would like to think that we can take a very pragmatic approach to how we move forward. Will we always agree? That is yet to be tested, but let us work our way through it, with the intention of trying to do the right thing by the business community, which we are all trying to help prosper and grow. Ultimately, that helps our whole economy and our people to prosper.

## Ulster Canal

T8. **Mr Elliott** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Ulster canal, which the First Minister mentioned was on today's NSMC agenda. (AQT 138/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** The Member will have a keen interest in this, given his proximity to it. The question of how we are going to make progress was raised again today. There will be a full report to the Assembly on the outworking of what we did today. Today's meeting was about taking stock of where we are and then what the imminent plans are. There will be further sectoral meetings to get into the in-depth detail around the next stage of the Ulster canal. There was huge enthusiasm to make sure that we fulfil the commitments that were made previously and that we advance the project and move on to the next stage.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the First Minister. There is a slight problem in a community facility in the area, which is very close to the canal, and its removal may be required. Have there been any discussions about moving that facility?

2.45 pm

**Mrs O'Neill:** That was not discussed today, but I am happy to ensure that you get a written response if that has been raised. You might want to write to the office to highlight what the challenge is, and I will be happy to get us to look at it.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes topical questions to the First Minister.

## Education

### Schools: Visits to Parliament Buildings

1. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Education what assistance is available to support schools to travel to Parliament Buildings for an official visit. (AQO 220/22-27)

**Mr Givan (The Minister of Education):** While I fully recognise the educational value inherent in children visiting Parliament Buildings with their schools, unfortunately, neither my Department nor the Education Authority (EA), as the funding authority for schools, provide specific additional schools funding for travel or lodgings for extracurricular activities. If a school wishes to bring its pupils to Parliament Buildings, it is a matter for the school to organise and fund that through its delegated budget or, possibly, through fundraising events and/or parental contributions. I know that the Member will appreciate that the education sector continues to face extensive unavoidable cost pressures and rising service demands associated with delivering my Department's statutory and policy obligations. My priority will be to provide stability and take every action possible to protect education funding and the front-line services within my Department's statutory remit.

**Mr Dickson:** I thank the Minister for his answer. In light of the budgetary challenges associated with travel for many schools, including those in my constituency, how does his Department ensure fair access for schools not only to this Building but, as he said, to other extracurricular activities, particularly for schools in rural or economically disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland and those that cannot, regrettably, raise large amounts of money through parental contributions and other fundraising activities?

**Mr Givan:** Obviously, there are various means by which funding can be raised, as I referenced in my original response to the Member. General funding is administered through the common funding formula, and, again, that is touched on in the independent review of education. That review, which was in place, has not been taken forward. However, this is one of the areas that I will look at when I consider a report from my Department on the independent review of education, where it touches on funding through that funding scheme.

The Member rightly raises the issue of the financial pressures on schools. I want more funding per pupil to be attributed to each school. I am putting that forward as part of our bid. That way, we can get more schools into surplus whereby they can fund visits to this place. I encourage schools to come to this place to learn about it. I first visited this place when I was at school. The late Members Billy

Bell and Ivan Davis and, indeed, you, Mr Speaker, were here at the time. That is where I got a taste for being involved in front-line politics in the Assembly. I encourage educational visits. We in the Assembly have an excellent Education Service that provides a lot of support for the schools that visit, and I certainly recommend that schools come here.

**Mrs Erskine:** The Minister mentioned parental contributions. Obviously, we have a cost-of-living crisis, and it is difficult for families at the minute. Where does the Minister stand on some schools asking for voluntary contributions from parents?

**Mr Givan:** Under current legislation, voluntary contributions are a matter for boards of governors of schools. While the collection of voluntary contributions is permissible, any request for that needs to make it clear that there is no obligation to contribute, and any registered pupil at the school should be treated no differently according to whether their parents or guardians have made a contribution. It is permissible, but, obviously, there are certain parameters with which such a request needs to comply.

**Mr McNulty:** In relation to funding for schools, does the Minister agree that suspending the school enhancement programme works at St Mary's Primary School, Barr, after £350,000 has already been spent will be a waste of his Department's limited financial resources? Will he agree to meet me and the St Mary's school leadership to discuss the progress of that much-needed project?

**Mr Speaker:** I am not sure that that is on the topic, but I will ask the Minister to respond.

**Mr Givan:** If the Assembly wants to pay for school enhancement projects as part of its visitation programme, that will be welcome. I doubt that it would go too far, mind you.

The Member raises an important issue around capital funding. On day 1 of this Assembly, I made a ministerial statement on the need for increased expenditure in our capital programme. The enhanced programmes are often smaller than the major capital ones. They should be supported. That is why, as part of my budgetary process, I have put forward a bid for well over £500 million to fund capital schemes. That is a live discussion that the Executive will need to consider as part of the budgetary process.

**Mr Speaker:** Question 2 has been withdrawn.

## ADHD/Autism: Irish-medium Assessments

3. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Education to outline how many people, via the Education Authority, are able to assess children and young people for ADHD and autism through the medium of Irish. (AQO 222/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** The Education Authority does not conduct the formal assessments of autism and/or ADHD. Assessments for autism or ADHD are conducted only by a specific group of healthcare professionals, for example paediatricians or child psychologists. Therefore, the issue is a matter ultimately for the Department of Health.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I ask the Minister to reconsider that with his colleague, Minister Swann, because a multidisciplinary team is there to do that. For a child not to be able to express themselves in their first language is putting them at a further disadvantage. I ask that the matter be reconsidered.

**Mr Givan:** The Member raises an important point. It relates to education, so, while the formal assessment is not carried out by the EA or my Department, the issue links in with the Department of Health and it is important that we work together on it. I assure the Member that we do. Particularly for children in the Irish-medium sector, where possible, the EA attempts to provide educational psychologists with experience in the Irish language or bilingualism. To assure the Member, we are also engaging with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) and the Irish-medium education sector to ensure that the specific needs of the sector are considered as part of the end-to-end review of special educational needs.

**Mr McReynolds:** Given the barriers that many children face in obtaining an ADHD diagnosis or statement, will the Minister's Department consider investigating the introduction of ADHD awareness training for teachers and support staff?

**Mr Givan:** I am happy to look at the broader issue that the Member has raised around autism training across the sector. It is an important issue for people to be aware of. I have no problem in saying to the Member that it should be considered.

## St Gerard's School and Support Services

4. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Education to outline what discussions he has had in relation to the provision of additional financial support to St Gerard's School and Support Services. (AQO 223/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** Special schools are funded directly through the Education Authority block grant, with all staffing costs, including sickness and maternity absence, school rates and maintenance costs being met directly by the Education Authority. However, my officials have been working closely with St Gerard's School and Support Services and the wider network of special schools to ensure that, where possible, additional funding is provided to enable additional supports at a school for the emergent presenting needs of pupils and their families. In response to emergent needs at St Gerard's, a second non-teaching vice principal post was approved in March this year, and a recruitment exercise is under way. During the 2023-24 financial year, St Gerard's received £312,000 in article 60 funding alongside additional funding totalling £75,000 across extended schools, home-to-school link, special educational needs and framework implementation funding and summer provisions.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Minister for his answer. St Gerard's is a great school. I declare an interest: I have a family member who works there. The parents whose kids go to St Gerard's cannot speak highly enough of it, but it is criminally under-resourced and bursting at the seams. People are literally queuing to send their children there. It is welcome news about the extra post, Minister, but will you give a precise date for when there will be increased funding so that St Gerard's can do what it does best?

**Mr Givan:** I certainly echo the Member's remarks on the excellence provided by the school. I will not share the language of "criminally" underfunded. There is underfunding, certainly, in the sector, and, when it comes to support for children who require additional needs provision, I will prioritise that and have done as part of my budget process. I have indicated to the Member, concerning the additional post in the school, some of the funding that has been made available. He will be aware that a business case for a new school was recently approved by the Department of Finance, but that is subject to the various stages that we need to go through and to capital funding being made available.

## Gaelscoil Uí Néill, Coalisland

5. **Mrs Dillon** asked the Minister of Education whether funding is available to commence the new build for Gaelscoil Uí Néill, Coalisland. (AQO 224/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** Gaelscoil Uí Néill is fully designed, with planning approval, and an integrated supply team is in contract. Subject to the availability of additional capital budget, the project is therefore ready to move on-site. Unfortunately, as I referred to in my statement to the Assembly on 12 February, substantial additional and sustained capital budget is urgently required before Gaelscoil Uí Néill and similar projects can be permitted to proceed to the construction stage. I have made the case for additional and sustained capital investment in our education infrastructure and have brought bids to the Executive for in excess of £543 million of capital funding for education in the 2024-25 year. Should capital funding become available, projects will then be reviewed and prioritised for delivery.

**Mrs Dillon:** I welcome the work that has been done so far by departmental officials. They really have worked hard on the project. The school has high praise for them. Given that Gaelscoil Uí Néill is in contract, will the Minister give a commitment that, should he get any capital, it will be an absolute priority to be moved on? There will be serious implications if it is not.

**Mr Givan:** The Member is aware of how advanced the project is. We have not entered into a formal contract with a company to build, but it is at a late stage and is shovel-ready, subject to capital funding becoming available. I cannot commit to funding something until I know what my funding envelope will be. That is part of the budgetary process. The school is very much at an advanced stage, but, until I know what capital is available to the Department, I am not able to give that absolute commitment.

**Mr Bradley:** Owing to the condition of the school estate and the rising cost of new buildings, should the Department not prioritise maintenance and minor works projects?

**Mr Givan:** The Member raises an important point. We want to have major capital developments, but we also want to have enhanced programmes. There is also maintenance that needs to be carried out in our school estate. There is a range of areas to which I want to see capital funding allocated, but there is a limited capital budget, and it is essential that I take forward a balanced

programme of investment across all the programme streams. That includes new-build majors through to the planned essential maintenance of the current estate. I also want to take forward a targeted, curriculum-based programme in the future, such as that for sports provision.

## SEND Places 2024-25

6. **Ms Nicholl** asked the Minister of Education to outline what plans he will put in place to ensure that all children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) will have access to appropriate school places for the 2024-25 academic year. (AQO 225/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** Children with a statement of special educational needs (SEN) follow a different process for securing a school placement from the general admissions process, one that seeks to ensure that their needs as outlined in their statement are met. Each child is individually placed. Children are referred for a SEN statement and review throughout the year, which means that there is a continual flow of children entering the process. That makes alignment with the general admissions process difficult. Access to appropriate school placements for children with SEN has been the subject of much discussion in recent weeks. The demand for specialist education provision has increased significantly over the past number of years, and the system has struggled to keep pace with the rising demand. In the past three academic years, the Education Authority has created 140 additional classes for special schools and 203 new specialist provision in mainstream schools (SPIMS) classes.

The position for this September is extremely challenging. On the basis of the Education Authority's latest planning assumptions, more than 1,000 additional specialist education places are needed by then.

My immediate priority is to increase the capacity across the education system to ensure sufficient appropriate places for children with SEN for September 2024, and the EA is working in collaboration with stakeholders and schools where it knows there are acute pressures to create additional places in special schools and through SPIMS.

3.00 pm

**Ms Nicholl:** Thank you, Minister, for your answer. You outlined the role of the statement in the process. Do you share my concern that, in the past 12 months, among the 138 staff who

work in the statementing element of the EA, 3,042 days of sick leave have been taken? What more can the Department do to ensure that the resource, the number of officials working with statementing, is up to scratch?

**Mr Givan:** I am concerned about the level of sick leave in this area, and a number of factors lead to delays around educational statements, including access to psychologists and the lack of availability of workforce in the area. That is why a considerable SEN review is taking place, in which there are multiple work streams. No single issue is going to turn this around.

It is vital that we always remember that at the heart of all this is a child. We must make sure that children get the right support from the right people at the right time. The system is failing to deliver that. I have inherited that situation, but I now have a responsibility, with the Education Authority, to address it. It is an area that the Member has an interest in, as does the Education Committee. Pulling in the same direction on this will be important for us to get the transformation that we need. A fundamental transformation in SEN is required so that we do not, year-on-year, have the same problem. We are going to have it this year. We need to deal with the pressures that we have and then get upstream so that we are much more advanced in our planning and are not dealing with a crisis-management scenario, which happened last year and is happening again this year.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Minister for his answer and the Member for asking such a good question. The key word in her question is "appropriate" places for pupils. What work is the Minister and his Department doing to ensure that the children who receive placements are in the appropriate school, whether that is a special school or SPIMS?

**Mr Givan:** The Member raises the question of getting the appropriate place. There have been occasions when a placement has been accepted in the school, and then it transpires that that is not working out to the benefit of the child, family or guardians responsible. Then, you need to look at trying to make changes. That presents real difficulty when a placement does not work out, but there is an ongoing process of selecting the right school for children. In that process the Education Authority engages with the family and with the relevant school, and it tries to ensure that the appropriate support is in place. There are examples of excellent support and children being given the best possible opportunity. However, there are examples of where it has

not worked, and that is something that we need to try to avoid.

**Mr Baker:** Can the Minister confirm whether all schools have been contacted in regard to establishing specialist provision for the 2024-25 academic year? If not, why not?

**Mr Givan:** It is an interesting question. Some of the schools that I have visited have indicated to me a willingness to provide additional capacity for children that they could accommodate. I have had to proactively connect the EA to those schools. We have been appealing for schools to come forward. Some schools have come forward but have not felt fully engaged in the process. I think that that is wrong. If a school wants to provide support, it is incumbent upon the Education Authority to identify whether that can be achieved and delivered. There are real challenges when it comes to capacity.

It is also important that, when a school provides a place, it gets support throughout the child's placement in the school. There are examples of principals who have indicated to me that although they provided a place, they have not felt supported. That creates a bad outcome for the school and also for the child.

**Mr McGrath:** In the Minister's response, we heard about early planning, engagement, new places and additional funds. All that has been done before, but, every year, we face the same problems. Is the Minister satisfied that something different will be done between now and September so that we will not see the same outcome this year?

**Mr Givan:** One of the steps that was taken before I came into office was to have a dedicated senior employee within the EA to proactively manage that. Also, the Department has a steering group, which is headed up at very senior level, so that we can identify how many places are needed and proactively seek to place children. That requires greater collaboration with the Department of Health, for example. The stage at which the Education Authority is sighted on children that will have additional needs has to be much earlier than two years and nine months. It needs to be when a health worker has identified the needs, in the first months of a child's life, which they do, and support has been put into place. However, the connection of sharing of that data between the Department of Health and the Education Authority and planning seem to be a challenge. That is something that needs to be addressed so that we get further upstream, as I talked about earlier.

**Ms Bunting:** The Minister will be aware that often the number of those with special educational needs are not included in the number of attendees at a school, thereby giving a false impression of the capacity and the spaces available at that school. Does the Minister have any plans to review that policy?

**Mr Givan:** Obviously, when building a new school, for example, we have, in the past, looked at the school's enrolment. That has not included the number of children who attend who have a statement of educational need. That does not make sense to me. You are building a new school, but children with additional needs are regarded as supernumerary, which is a word that I am not particularly comfortable with. However, a school has to accommodate children with those additional needs, so that should be part of the planning assumptions when you are considering development proposals and new builds. The Member is right to raise that, and it is something that I am looking at.

## School Capital Projects: West Tyrone

7. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Education for an update on plans for capital projects for schools in West Tyrone. (AQO 226/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** The largest programme of work in the area — in fact, anywhere in Northern Ireland — is the Strule Shared Education Campus Omagh. With an estimated capital value in the region of £400 million, the campus will provide a state-of-the-art shared centre of learning. It will bring together six schools from across the Omagh community and incorporate grammar, non-selective and special school provision. Over 4,000 children and young people from all backgrounds will be educated on the campus. I am pleased that the Executive have confirmed their support for the programme, with £150 million of ring-fenced funding for it committed over the next three years.

I move now to other capital works in the area. Major works at Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh — forgive me for, I am sure, mispronouncing that — in Strabane are taking place on site and are due to be completed in June of this year; St Catherine's Primary School, Strabane, has an approved business case and is at the concept design stage; Dean Maguirc College in Carrickmore, which was paused in 2023, remains so; Drumragh Integrated College, Omagh, is at the design stage; and St Mary's Primary School and Clogher and Strabane



primary schools are progressing in design and business case stages, respectively, under the school enhancement programme.

**Mr McHugh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. *[Translation: I thank the Minister for his answer so far.]* Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh an t-ainm atá ar an scoil sin. *[Translation: Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh is the name of that school.]* In addition, we have Knockavoe School in Strabane, which has a capacity problem. Will the Minister outline what support is being given to Knockavoe School by the Education Authority to address that problem?

**Mr Givan:** I appreciate the correction on Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh. Hopefully, that pronunciation was better. I am more than happy to follow up with a detailed written response to the Member on the capacity issue in the specific school that he mentioned.

**Mr Clarke:** Mr Speaker, you will be surprised to hear that I am not interested in West Tyrone. I am more interested in how the Minister plans to prioritise all the capital projects in his portfolio.

**Mr Givan:** South Antrim is of particular interest to the Member. He asks about prioritisation. Major capital funding has been available to meet inescapable pressures only. That is for the Department to continue to meet contractual obligations where construction has commenced, and to continue to honour the integrated consulting team contracts regarding the design phase of those works. A number of projects are fully designed and awaiting integrated supply team procurements. However, due to funding not having been permitted, those projects have not progressed at this stage. Should additional capital funding be made available, however, all projects will be reviewed and will be prioritised to allow progression to be made.

**Mr Mathison:** We are all aware of the impact of the removal of ring fencing from the Fresh Start funding. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm what consideration he undertook of the options that are available to him for restoring ring fencing around the £150 million Fresh Start funding pot in order to allow those new-build and other projects for integrated schools to proceed.

**Mr Givan:** I have spoken before about the Fresh Start moneys. I proactively engaged with the Secretary of State, who, unfortunately, did not provide a positive response around that. What I, as Minister, was able to do was move

all the schemes into my conventional capital programme, with the exception of Strule, given the quantum of funding that was needed. That move provides reassurance for those schools that their projects will continue to be taken forward as part of my major conventional capital programme. Given that Strule was the one outstanding significant project that was part of those Fresh Start moneys, the Executive were able to provide that ring-fenced funding of £150 million. Subject to the full business case proceeding, that will allow the project to commence. Obviously, further moneys will be needed to deliver on Strule. All those schemes in Fresh Start either have been moved into my conventional programme or, as in the example of Strule, have now been given Executive priority.

### **Bangor Central Integrated Primary School**

8. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Education whether his Department will prioritise a new build for Bangor Central Integrated Primary School. (AQO 227/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** The approval on 5 March 2024 of the planning application for the Bangor Central Integrated Primary School project is a major milestone on the road to its delivery. It marks the completion of the planning and design stages. As with the other former Fresh Start projects that have now transferred into my Department's major capital works programme, Bangor Central will progress to construction in line with conventional budget availability in the same manner as all other major capital works projects that my Department takes forward. I have submitted high-priority bids for each of those projects to the Department of Finance as part of the Budget process. I ask that every party at the Executive supports those bids.

**Mr Chambers:** Thank you, Minister, for your answer. I appreciate that you understand the disappointment that the parents, pupils and staff feel that funding for a new build was withdrawn at such an advanced stage of the planned project. Given that this is a hugely inadequate and aged campus that does not meet those people's current or future needs, can the Minister offer any hope, bearing in mind the budgetary pressures on his Department, for a timely and positive outcome?

**Mr Givan:** I, of course, want to advance a major capital programme across the school estate not just for Bangor Central Integrated but for all those schools. Over 100 major capital programmes were announced back in 2010: 35

of them are complete; and nine are in that contractual committed zone. That gives you a quantum of well over 50 schemes that are not funded, as well as all the other capital projects that we need to take forward. That is why, as we consider the outworkings of the Budget and, subsequently, the Executive's agreement of the Budget paper that will come from the Finance Minister, Education should be given priority. Every Member of those parties has raised various capital projects in their constituencies. There will be an opportunity for Members to prove how genuinely committed they are to funding Education when we agree a Budget.

**Mr Dunne:** Can the Minister give an assurance that he will continue to press the UK Government on the need for increased funding, including for schools such as Bangor Central Integrated Primary School and Priory Integrated College in Holywood, both of which are in my constituency?

**Mr Givan:** I can. Mr Dunne, a Member for North Down, has pressed me vociferously on the need for capital investment for those schools. I have already engaged with the UK Government. The Executive collectively continue to raise a needs-based approach to the funding from Treasury.

They have yet to provide the proper baseline, based on independent fiscal reports around the financial framework for appropriate funding. We continue to press the UK Government on that matter. Further resources that become available to the Executive can subsequently be allocated to different Departments. I want the Department of Education to be prioritised, and that will allow those schools and others to make more progress.

3.15 pm

**Mr Speaker:** We will now move to topical questions. Question 1 has been withdrawn.

### **EA: Irish-medium Assessments**

T2. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Education, following her previous question on what the EA can do to assess children with ADHD and/or autism or with an individual education plan through the medium of Irish, to undertake a review of the available resources, particularly in North Belfast. (AQT 142/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** There is a benefit to being drawn to ask a question and then asking a topical question to follow up and tease the issue out.

Again, I am aware of the specific challenges in the Irish-medium education sector around SEN provision and the support and resources that are currently available and what is further needed. That is why we are working with CnaG and looking, as part of the end-to-end review, to identify the specific support for children in that area that can be provided. We are also working with the EA on training for all schools through its SEN pupil support services. The psychology service has established a working group, so that best practice in the immersion of education and bilingualism can be embedded.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I appreciate the Minister's response and the fact that he is working with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta on the end-to-end review. My experience in my constituency office is that a lot of concerns are being raised by parents and guardians about the delays. I appreciate that the delays are across the board, but can the Minister update me in writing about the current status of the end-to-end review with CnaG?

**Mr Givan:** I am happy to follow up with the Member in more detail on the matter, but I will add a little more information on some of the areas in the provision of Irish-medium education that we are working on. The Middletown Centre for Autism, for example, provides workforce training, online resources and sessions for parents in that area.

I am aware of the issue. It transcends Education and Health, where there are different statutory responsibilities, but I get it that the person who needs the assistance does not differentiate between Education and Health; they expect to get the support when they need it. I am alert to those issues and will follow up in writing with the Member.

### **Special Schools: Staff Shortages**

T3. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps that his Department is taking to address class closures in special schools in Newry and Armagh, given that staff shortages have led to a number of such closures, which are impacting on the most vulnerable children and young people. (AQT 143/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** That is not unique to Newry and Armagh. Having the appropriate workforce available is an issue for all our constituencies, and that is a challenge. The challenges are the terms and conditions that the staff operate to and attracting people into the workforce when we have a growing private sector that offers

better terms and conditions. We are competing with the private sector. In border communities, we are also competing with what people are being offered to work in the Republic of Ireland. Those are challenges for us. There is no simple answer that will enhance the available workforce, but we recognise that we need to provide more support. There is more work to do to make sure that there is an appropriate workforce to meet the needs that continue to grow.

**Mr Boylan:** I appreciate the Minister's answer, but the children come first, and he will agree with that. Does the Minister have any contingency plans to address the matter?

**Mr Givan:** Obviously, I want to retain people in the workforce. That is part of the business case for the pay and grading review for support staff, and that includes classroom assistants and the other people in the workforce. I want to see that taken forward. That will assist in trying to retain staff, but we also need to identify what issues we need to address so that more people come into the workforce.

### Schools: Procurement

T4. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Education whether he accepts that there are occasions on which many schools could more easily and cost-effectively procure goods and services than they can through the EA process, given that he will be aware of the financial constraints in which many schools find themselves. (AQT 144/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** Principals have raised that issue with me, particularly with regard to the small amounts of money that are needed for projects in a school for which they have to go through an EA procurement system. That system is meant to deliver savings, because of the economy of scale that can be delivered by doing it through the EA. Given the outworking of that, however, some schools say that they could do it more efficiently and cost-effectively themselves. We need to look at that, but I am also alert to the various pieces of legislation that pertain to procurement law.

**Mr Clarke:** Given those procurement regulations, will the Minister undertake to examine other ways in which schools could find themselves in a more favourable position that allows them greater flexibility to save money?

**Mr Givan:** I will have officials look into the area of procurement and at whether there is a level

of expenditure, albeit a small level, that schools can manage themselves, without having to go through the EA. I am open to that, because, if it can be more cost-effective and delivered in a timelier fashion, we should consider that in light of the various parameters by which procurement law pertains in this area.

### Education Authority: Pay and Grading Review

T5. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Education whether he has submitted a bid, either to the Finance Minister or the Executive, for the funds for a pay and grading review for Education Authority workers. (AQT 145/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** Yes, a business case was submitted to the Department of Finance. The Education Authority provided information to the Department of Education. That business case was sent on to the Department of Finance, but the EA subsequently contacted us to say that the information was not correct. That delayed the process, but my Department worked at pace with the EA to get accurate information. That allowed a business case to be presented to the Department of Education that my Department subsequently sent to the Department of Finance for its consideration.

**Mr Carroll:** I stress to the Minister that the process needs to be sped up. Those workers have been waiting for six years for the funding to be released. It is completely unacceptable that Ministers, including the Education Minister, got a wage increase and are on £90K a year, when those workers — bus drivers, classroom assistants, bus escorts, catering staff and other staff, some of whom do life-saving procedures — are again told, "You have to wait". I urge the Minister to make sure that the money is released urgently.

**Mr Givan:** I assure the Member that that forms part of my bid to the Department of Finance for the budget settlement for this financial year. I have met the unions and indicated my support for resolving the pay and grading review issue. That is separate from the pay settlements, because those workers are part of a national joint negotiating committee and have received pay increases over the past number of years. The issue, however, when it comes to the impact that that increase has on them, is with the baseline by which they are paid, as well as the wider issues with recruitment and retention of the workforce. That is why the pay and grading review has been taking place. I have supported the business case that went forward to the Department of Finance, and it forms part

of my bid for the allocation to the Department of Education as part of the Budget process.

## **Bangor Central Integrated Primary School**

T6. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education whether he can give a cast-iron guarantee that Bangor Central Integrated Primary School will get a new building, given that he mentioned the Fresh Start funding that is no longer available for new-build schools and that he has moved those projects into his capital build programme. (AQT 146/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** All of that is subject to capital funding being made available. I have outlined the significant number of major capital schemes that are currently in my Department. I have highlighted the inadequacy of the resources available not only to fund major new-builds but to fund enhancement programmes, to tackle the maintenance backlog in our school estate and to develop a capital programme that can help to facilitate the delivery of curriculums in schools. That is fundamentally important. I have been to a number of schools, and Shankill Primary School is one that is in an absolutely appalling condition. It is there waiting for funding to be made available. I am not in a position to guarantee that any school will get the go-ahead, other than the fact that I am making the case for significant increases in capital funding. Should that be made available to the Department, I can review those capital projects and prioritise schemes that can be taken forward.

**Mr Easton:** Is the Minister willing to meet Mr Campbell, the head of Bangor Central Integrated Primary School, to offer some reassurance about the future of a new school build?

**Mr Givan:** I always, particularly when an MLA asks me to facilitate a meeting, seek to accommodate that. If the Member wants me to do that, I am happy to do so. The reassurance that I have provided to all of the schools impacted by Fresh Start is that they have been moved into my conventional programme and continue to advance. Other major capital schools are not advancing in my Department; those in Fresh Start are. Understandably, other schools are asking, "Why are you pursuing the Fresh Start schools when I have been part of your conventional development schemes in the Department?". Fresh Start schools have been given a high level of reassurance by me, and I am being challenged by other schools asking, "What about us?". I want to ensure that there is

fairness and equity in everything that I do as a Minister when it comes to the development of our new school estate.

## **Education Authority: Pay and Grading Review**

T7. **Ms Brownlee** asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the pay and grading review for support staff, for an update on when those people will be paid. (AQT 147/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** Obviously, the process was that a business case had to be put forward. I can confirm that the Department of Finance has approved the business case, so that is a significant development. It is now subject to funding being made available through the Budget process. I want to see that being successful. I have been reassured by Sinn Féin's spokesperson on education that the Minister of Finance will look sympathetically at this in the funding that was allocated to resolve a number of the other pay settlements — funding of £688 million. This issue was not included, but the Minister of Finance indicated that she would look at the issue, subject to the business cases progressing. They have now progressed and been approved. It is now subject to the Budget outcome.

**Ms Brownlee:** I thank the Minister for that detailed response. I am delighted to hear that it has been progressed and will be approved. Now we have to encourage and move this as fast as possible for all support staff in the education sector.

**Mr Givan:** The Member is absolutely right. When we think about support staff, we are talking about some of the lowest-paid workers in the public sector, and yet they are delivering vital services — your classroom assistants, cooks and bus drivers. The action short of a strike in this area has been having a detrimental impact on the outcomes for children and young people, particularly in our special schools, when strikes have taken place. I want to see the pay and grading review successfully dealt with. I will meet the unions again on 18 April to give them another update. It is now very much over to the Executive to make the funding available for this to be resolved.

## **Composite Classes**

T8. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Education for an update on his opinion of, and his Department's work on, composite classes. (AQT 148/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** It allows schools to develop. In my constituency, I can think of one primary school in the village where I lived, Maghaberry, where we moved from a seven-class base school. Enrolment was increasing as the population grew, and we had to move to providing composite classes. That was the only way to allow the school to continue to grow. As populations grow, you want to move to having two class bases in a school. Composite classes have a role where it meets the need of a local population.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes topical questions to the Minister of Education. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment while we make a change to the Chair.

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

3.30 pm

## Private Members' Business

### Shared Future: Strategic Framework

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly recognises the ongoing need to build a genuinely shared future; expresses concern at the ongoing and severe costs, both social and financial, of continued social and economic segregation; notes the value of increasing numbers of people now enjoying educational, sporting and career opportunities free from the confines of traditional community divisions; further recognises the need to expand these opportunities to the entire community, including by ensuring that public money is spent on delivery of public services that are open to all rather than on maintaining or further embedding division; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring forward a strategic framework for a shared future delivering public-sector reform to tackle the costs of division while building on good relations work already undertaken. — [Ms Bradshaw.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Order, Members. We now return to the debate on a strategic framework for a shared future. I call Kate Nicholl to conclude the debate and make a winding-up speech on the motion.

**Ms Nicholl:** I start by thanking all the Members who spoke for their considered contributions to this important debate. Before addressing some key aspects that were raised in the debate, I will focus on two issues, to do with integrated education and shared housing, that were touched on briefly by my Alliance Party colleagues.

On integrated education, as my colleague Connie Egan stated, research from Ulster University has estimated that the additional cost of maintaining a divided education system — £226 million each year, or over £600,000 every day — clearly shows that our divided education system has deep financial costs. Educating our children separately also has societal costs, however. Our schools should represent the diversity of our society, and integrated education provides the intentionality required to ensure that we are building a more inclusive and reconciled society.

Harry Harvey is one of my favourite members of the DUP, so it pains me to challenge him, but I did not agree with anything that he said about integrated education. *[Laughter.]* It is not just about people from mixed backgrounds attending a school. It is about so much more than that. It is about an ethos. Not every school is integrated. Integrated schools have an intentionality and ethos, and they give our children the chance to build relationships with pupils from different backgrounds and to appreciate and celebrate their differences and what they have in common. That theme was brought out in the debate: it is not about denying our differences but about celebrating them and how doing so enriches us, as the deputy First Minister said.

Alliance believes that every child should have the choice and option of attending an integrated school, thus reducing the cost of division and playing a crucial role in building a shared future. Increasing integrated education provision in order to meet demand should be an important part of the strategic framework for the shared future that the motion calls for.

I really appreciated Matthew O'Toole's comments about the cut to funding and the impact that that has. Sinéad McLaughlin talked about how 7% of schools — 8% now — are integrated. That is just not enough.

I will move on to shared housing. My colleague Paula Bradshaw, who, in moving the motion, spoke so well, referenced how the lack of shared housing is a major barrier to building a genuinely shared future. Shared housing was recently moved out of the Executive Office and into the Communities portfolio, forming part of the broader housing brief, and we find that concerning. Shared housing must be prioritised, and it cannot be diluted or sidelined any further. It must be given the funding and resources required in order to ensure that it does not get lost or neglected.

Where shared housing is developed, it must be reflective of Northern Ireland in all its diversity. As Connie said, it is not just about two communities; it is about creating communities that are genuinely reflective and full of the richness of our increasingly diverse society. We strongly believe that shared housing is a crucial tool in building a shared future and that, like integrated education, it must form part of the strategic framework for building a shared future.

I really liked Mike Nesbitt's contribution. He mentioned the positivity that exists in the Building now. It feels as though there is a genuine commitment to working together and

collaboration. I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for being so committed to that, and especially for their portrayal of that to the public, because the public really need to see it. Today's debate has highlighted that.

I welcome Carál's points about how it is not just in working-class areas that sectarianism exists. I will not name the areas, but, as someone who has canvassed in all parts of my constituency and other constituencies, I can say that some of the most blatant sectarianism that I have witnessed came from very privileged areas where it goes unchecked. That is a piece of work that we all need to address.

There is an urgent need to prioritise the allocation of multi-annual funding for the good relations sector's future planning and sustainability. We have talked a lot about the sector and the work that communities do, but they are hindered by the lack of multi-annual funding and the instability that results from a lack of stable government. The sector is often first to become vulnerable to deep cuts when government budgets are tight.

We need to widen the scope of good relations. We are more than just two communities; in my work with minority ethnic communities, that is constantly raised with me. In relation to that, Paula raised the issue of racial prejudice and refugee integration. A constituent of mine Takura Makoni had racist graffiti sprayed on his house yesterday. His only crime was speaking out about racism in our society. I had the privilege of working for Anna Lo when she was an MLA, and Anna always said that sectarianism and racism are two sides of the same coin. We allow it to happen by not calling it out, and we all need to do better in challenging the sectarianism and racism that exist in our society. Quite frankly, it is often the same people who come out and talk about that, so we all need to do better.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with her point about bigotry coming from the same well, but is she also concerned, as I am, that, according to the last stats that I saw, racism is outstripping sectarianism and seems to be even more problematic than some people might believe?

**Ms Nicholl:** I completely agree, and I pay tribute to you, because, at every town hall meeting on asylum seekers and refugees that I go to, you are there. Yes, that really needs to be addressed, and that is why I welcome work on the racial equality strategy. I look forward to seeing the results, but they cannot be just words; we need actions. There needs to be

monitoring and data, and we need to have targets to work towards.

Pádraig Delargy discussed T:BUC and Urban Villages and the positive effects that they have. He said that he would have liked to see the North/South dimension. I really liked the "take stock" perspective that his speech brought, because that was our intention. It is about how far we have come and also where we need to go.

Emma Sheerin talked about her politics and said that it was a very important conversation. I liked her line about no one asking where you went on Sunday. We should not ask that

David Honeyford gave such a lovely contribution about Granny Sally. As Sinéad McLaughlin said, it happens with love; I really like that line. Sinéad said lots of useful things about how society is changing. She talked about new communities and about recognising that, for too many people, division is real and that there is structural segregation. That is true.

The deputy First Minister apologised for being late. Nobody held that against her, and we are delighted to see the North/South Ministerial Council meet today. She recognised the work that communities do, and we all see that in our constituencies. That is why the framework is so important. Communities are delivering that work, and, as an Assembly, we should not hinder that. We should support and drive that work and do more around it. I thank her for that. She said that T:BUC is under review. She talked about her own identity and culture and said that our identity is part of us and that we must respect that in others. She then talked about the different elements that have been successful, including Urban Villages, shared housing and the United Youth programme.

All in all, it was a really positive debate, and the contributions were really worthwhile. A lot of work still needs to happen, and we have talked about the multiple areas of work and how that will require cross-departmental working. The tone during the debate, from most people, was very welcome. I hope that it was taken that our intention was really just to celebrate our diversity, our differences, our different heritages and histories and everything that makes us unique, special and different. As an Assembly, we should be supporting that and working towards a genuinely shared future that we can all enjoy.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly recognises the ongoing need to build a genuinely shared future; expresses concern at the ongoing and severe costs, both social and financial, of continued social and economic segregation; notes the value of increasing numbers of people now enjoying educational, sporting and career opportunities free from the confines of traditional community divisions; further recognises the need to expand these opportunities to the entire community, including by ensuring that public money is spent on delivery of public services that are open to all rather than on maintaining or further embedding division; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring forward a strategic framework for a shared future delivering public-sector reform to tackle the costs of division while building on good relations work already undertaken.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Members, take your ease very briefly while we change the top Table.

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

## **NI Water Challenges**

**Mr Nesbitt:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly recognises the failure of existing water and waste infrastructure to meet current and future demand; further recognises that existing funding models have restricted NI Water's ability to meet commitments to maintain and develop services for residential and business needs; and calls on the Minister for Infrastructure to provide a detailed options paper on restructuring NI Water to include consideration of mutualisation.*

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

**Mr Nesbitt:** I should point out that it was my party colleague John Stewart, the Ulster Unionist spokesperson on infrastructure, who was scheduled to lead on the debate, but, unfortunately, he is not here because he is

unwell. I am sure that the House will join me in wishing him a speedy recovery.

I will begin with some thanks. First, I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber to respond to the debate and, more generally, for his engagement on the issue of water management. I thank the Assembly research team for a very detailed pre-debate paper, and I also thank all the individuals and organisations that contacted us with their queries, questions and comments.

I rise to address a really pressing issue that demands urgent attention; the state of Northern Ireland's water infrastructure. We are facing a crisis that requires action such as strategic investment, policy reform and changes to governance. Those are the three essential elements that we need to address. What we are calling for is, I believe, entirely consistent with the view of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), which published a paper that called for a review.

That document was called 'Funding water infrastructure in Northern Ireland', and it called for a comprehensive review of alternative arrangements.

### 3.45 pm

Let us begin by acknowledging the key challenges. Our water and sewerage network is ageing, to say the least. Over a third of pipes are more than 100 years old. The result is leakage rates that exceed 25%. Underinvestment in upgrading waste water treatment facilities leaves us struggling to meet environmental compliance standards, and climate change will exacerbate those challenges, with heavy rainfall likely to overwhelm our capacity through waste water and sewage. Compounding those issues are concerns around the funding model and the affordability of water charges. Of course, political instability in recent years has not helped in strategic decision-making and investment planning.

The impacts of underfunding are profound and far-reaching. We face limitations in providing new water and sewerage connections for households and commercial development. That leads to construction delays and stalled projects. In turn, that will restrict economic growth and result in missed investment opportunities, which may tarnish our reputation and make Northern Ireland less attractive for inward investment. As the First Minister recorded at Question Time just an hour or so

ago, the positivity of her visit with the deputy First Minister to Washington ahead of St Patrick's Day was quite astonishing, not least from the point of view of the business community that, in America, is saying that the time is right to take a look at investing here in Northern Ireland.

The impact of the infrastructure deficit on housing is perhaps one of the most damaging outcomes of the historical lack of leadership and funding surrounding our water and sewerage management. It is widely accepted that we face a housing shortfall that places tens of thousands of families across Northern Ireland in crisis. It is simply the case that a growing number of planning applications going before council planning offices are approved but are then subject to agreement with Northern Ireland Water on how costs for water and waste infrastructure are to be met.

There may be those in the Chamber who feel that such costs should be passed to developers and that such a decision would alleviate pressures on our existing services. Unfortunately, however, simply adding such charges on to developers creates serious issues, particularly in housing, both private and social. The cost of funding water and waste infrastructure in new developments creates pressures on housing associations, which can mean that whole social housing projects are scrapped because the funding to meet those additional costs is simply not there.

The additional costs for new-build private and affordable housing are passed directly on to the purchaser, pricing more and more people out of being able to buy a home. I have examples of that in my constituency. There is a development in Newtownards where the developers had to fork out an additional £1 million to install the water infrastructure that was necessary to allow the houses to be built. It is my impression, from speaking to them, that that was nearly a deal-breaker in the decision for that development to go ahead.

On the same theme, the Construction Employers Federation (CEF) estimates that waste water capacity constraints are holding up the building of some 8,450 homes. It believes that that equates to around £1 billion of investment. If you couple that with the proposals of housing associations and other developers, you will find that the Construction Employers Federation believes that the building of approximately 19,000 homes is, today, unable to proceed. Indeed, Northern Ireland Water accepts that over 100 areas have waste



water treatment works that are at or approaching capacity.

There are, however, potential actions that we can take to address those challenges. We could embark on a multi-year programme to replace the highest-risk water mains and sewers alongside upgrades to waste water treatment works' capacity and regulation compliance. Environmental protection measures, such as sewer separation and sustainable drainage systems, are also imperative, as is the effective management of agricultural run-off and the implementation of environmental farming incentives. My party continues to propose considering the mutualisation of Northern Ireland Water into a member-owned cooperative model. That could provide access to lower-cost financing and capital markets, remove us from public-borrowing constraints and enable more independent governance and long-term strategic planning. Reinvestment of surpluses and increased efficiencies would be key benefits of such a model.

Turning to the current model, perhaps it is worth discussing some of the issues that, we believe, should be addressed and overcome. The shareholder of Northern Ireland Water is the Department for Infrastructure. It has a licence to be so from the independent regulator. The Utility Regulator determines price, and it is currently price control 21 (PC21), which runs until March 2027. PC21 was based on social and environmental guidance issued by the Department after public consultation. PC21 is accepted by the Department and the Northern Ireland Executive. The Utility Regulator has advised the Department that its mid-term review of PC21, which is under way, is likely to require more, rather than less, investment.

It is a fact as I know it, but the Minister may correct me, that the Department lends money to Northern Ireland Water and charges interest on that loan and that no other public body in Northern Ireland pays interest for a similar arrangement. The Department also takes a dividend from Northern Ireland Water, and I am informed that if you add the dividends and the interest paid to date, that is a collective sum of £1 billion that could otherwise have been invested in the water infrastructure. Investing in the water infrastructure was, of course, a commitment of the New Decade, New Approach deal. It states:

*"The Executive will invest urgently in wastewater infrastructure".*

The question is this: has that happened? As a party, we call on the Department to follow the

Audit Office recommendations, but, in the meantime, to stop taking the interest and dividends from Northern Ireland Water and allow it to invest to facilitate the building of more houses.

Northern Ireland Water, I believe, costs taxpayers around £370 million per annum in subsidy and £450 million in capital every year. That, frankly, is the inescapable cost of owning a water company, and it is only bound to increase as we go on unless we find a different governance model and a different financial model. I look forward to the Minister's response.

**Mrs Erskine:** I beg to move the following amendment:

*After "needs;" insert:*

*"believes additional investment in water and sewerage capacity throughout Northern Ireland is critical to driving economic growth, ending regional inequalities in provision and protecting the environment;"*

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

**Mrs Erskine:** I move the amendment to this important motion in my capacity as a DUP MLA for Fermanagh and South Tyrone and not as the Chair of the Infrastructure Committee.

Getting our water infrastructure right is essential for development and growing our economy, to ensure that there are social and affordable homes across Northern Ireland and, not least, environmentally, in preventing overflows into our waterways. Furthermore, let us not take for granted the fact that we have clean drinking water. However, we do have a crisis in the here and now. Without the serious and long-term sustainable funding that we need for Northern Ireland Water, we are going to destroy our construction industry, wreck our economy, add to homelessness and continue the pollution of our waterways. There needs to be a fundamental rethink on how we continue to address the failures that have continued for years.

Our amendment seeks to strengthen the motion by pointing out our belief in the need for that additional investment in water and sewerage infrastructure, which is critical to driving the economy and economic growth, ending regional

inequalities in provision and protecting the environment. As well as that, we call on the Minister to provide a detailed options paper on restructuring Northern Ireland Water and to consider mutualisation.

Recently, the Infrastructure Committee had briefings from Northern Ireland Water and a finance briefing from the Department, and the Minister was at the Committee. Evidence from Northern Ireland Water was particularly damning in relation to the crisis facing our systems without investment. My sense is that, at the moment, Northern Ireland Water simply carries out the basics. Clean drinking water is provided but, thereafter, challenges remain. As a recent Northern Ireland Audit Office report pointed out, projects related to safe water delivery have tended to be prioritised over investment in infrastructure.

I must be truthful: I am not sure that many have fully grasped the level of emergency that we have reached in Northern Ireland Water. We are not hearing alarm bells ringing every day on our air waves, but we should be. On 21 February this year, the CEO of Northern Ireland Water told the Committee:

*"We have more overflows per head of population, and per kilometre of pipe, than is the case in the UK because, over many years, not enough money has been spent on the sewer network. Rather than building more infrastructure, more overflows were put in place."*

That is damning. We have failed in how our infrastructure meets the needs and demands of Northern Ireland. The motion is therefore timely. It comes in the wake of fresh Northern Ireland Audit Office reports, one of which is entitled 'Water Quality in Northern Ireland's Lakes and Rivers' and the other, 'Funding water infrastructure in Northern Ireland'.

First, on water quality, I want to make the point that, whilst agriculture and businesses contribute to some of the pollution, we cannot escape the fact that one in eight pollution episodes can be linked to Northern Ireland Water, a body that should be intrinsically linked to ensuring best procedure and upholding government policies on protecting the environment. Once more, I suspect that the figure could be higher, given that, in Infrastructure Committee evidence sessions, it was pointed out that we are not sure exactly where all the overflows in the system are, because we failed to provide much-needed investment for camera infrastructure.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Member for giving way. I am just checking: is it right that, in fact, NI Water has the option of consent to discharge, which means that it could be discharging sewage into the waterways without the fear of investigation or prosecution?

**Mrs Erskine:** Unfortunately, the Member is correct. Questions have certainly been raised about that, and I may point to it during my contribution.

Some Members may want to focus on the extent of sanctions levelled at farm businesses or to judge their contribution to water pollution incidents, but at least there are penalties. The same level of accountability should be apparent in NI Water, yet there is a perception, rightly or wrongly, that there is a double standard. Concerns around the corrosive impact of stop-start funding and budgets that simply are not big enough, whilst entirely justified, cannot be used as a convenient smokescreen for improving standards and oversight of current services. It is extremely frustrating that, eight years after the start of major reform agreed between the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and NI Water, revised waste water compliance assessment arrangements still have not been implemented.

I accept that providing clarity of funding each year would help to plan for the need and for the emergency. Northern Ireland Water does not have medium- or long-term clarity on funding, and the price control process places a heavy emphasis on determining the cost of delivering the various projects but is not linked to any long-term budgetary planning. The NI Audit Office report recommended that DFI and NI Water should complete a comprehensive review of alternative funding and governance arrangements.

The DUP manifesto that I stood on in 2022 called for greater investment but also the need to review how NI Water is funded.

My party pointed out the need to explore the merits of granting NI Water borrowing powers and to ensure that spending on the water network is fair to all communities and regions. The DUP brought a motion to the Assembly in the previous mandate that called for a new strategy to enhance and expand Northern Ireland's water and sewerage infrastructure, with a particular focus on ending regional inequalities. We note with regret the lack of progress to date.

**4.00 pm**

Addressing the crisis in capacity is a cross-departmental need. For the Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy, without drains, there can be no cranes. Every month that passes without a sustainable approach to meeting current demand for connection to the network leads to further missed opportunities for business expansion, boosting employment and construction and providing new housing for those in need or those wanting to get on to the property ladder. A letter on 6 March to the Infrastructure Committee told of the consequences if we do not invest: 19,000 proposed homes are unlikely to be built, and 55 commercial developments are unlikely to progress, with an estimated impact on 1,500 employees in the agri-food industry. What discussions has the Minister had around the Executive table to highlight those concerns and fight for investment?

The DUP also acknowledges that, as a society and as ratepayers, we must play our role and ensure that we stop any potential impact on the system. Prevention is better than cure. It is right that we reduce the amount of pollutants entering our waterways. However, let us not forget that Northern Ireland Water is the largest landowner in Northern Ireland. Are the public really seeing those assets being used effectively, particularly given the huge sums of money paid to Northern Ireland Water from the public purse?

It is crucial that the Minister urgently takes forward the recommendations in recent reports to deal with the issues at hand. It is imperative that we move beyond doing the basics. Millions are spent on cleaning the NI Water system, which is right, but it is effectively self-harming; it is not sustainable. We must turn the tide before even providing safe drinking water becomes harder. Therefore, I hope that the Assembly will endorse the amendment, which strengthens the argument for investment and change.

**Mr Boylan:** A decade of Tory austerity and cuts have devastated our public services. As a result of historical underfunding, our water and waste infrastructure has been severely impacted, due to which areas across the North face development challenges. We need and deserve a high standard of water quality and waste water infrastructure to ensure that we provide a proper service, to protect our watercourses from pollution and to safeguard our environment. NI Water has long warned of the effect of the lack of funding that it has had in the North. That is just another symptom of Tory budgets not allowing vital public services to be properly resourced. We need long-term

sustainable investment in the North's sewerage and waste water network so that we can properly deliver fit-for-purpose infrastructure.

The public are already struggling during the cost-of-living crisis as we speak. The last thing that households need is additional bills. Sinn Féin remains resolute in its opposition to domestic water charges and privatisation. We are focused on getting our public services the resources that they need without adding a further burden on workers and families. It is clear that our waste water and sewerage infrastructure faces huge challenges, but it must be stressed that privatisation and water charges are not the solution.

NI Water is a vast and important piece of infrastructure that needs to be properly resourced. For reference of scale, there are more than 1,000 waste water treatment facilities, 24 water treatment works, 27,000 kilometres of water pipes and over 16,000 kilometres of sewer pipes. On top of that, NI Water is the largest electricity consumer in the North. Despite the budgetary pressures, it continues to provide a high-quality service, and that should be noted. In February, NI Water representatives attended the Infrastructure Committee, at which they detailed the significant challenges that they face. They also detailed the positive work that they have been carrying out, such as coming in over target for water quality and making efficiency savings. NI Water has also developed a climate change strategy, recognising the need to play its part as the North's largest electricity consumer. At that presentation, NIW representatives also indicated that the present PC21 delivery programme faces serious challenges, citing increasing energy prices and construction costs.

Our water and sewerage services need sustainable investment in order to provide quality drinking water, to ensure that environmental protections are in place, to help build housing and to facilitate economic development. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and welcome and look forward to other contributions.

**Mr Brown:** I thank the signatories to the motion for tabling it. It is a very important issue and one that deserves perhaps more attention than it often gets. NI Water is a crucial aspect of our infrastructure in Northern Ireland and provides a service that none of us can live without: clean, fresh water and the safe disposal of waste water. I also welcome the amendment and confirm our party's support for the motion and the amendment.

For too long, NI Water has been a Cinderella service that has suffered from historical underinvestment. The timely report at the end of March from the NI Audit Office was an important reminder of what we already know about the underfunding of Northern Ireland's water infrastructure: it has been chronically neglected. It is foundational economic infrastructure that is crucial to our quality of life and to the wider economy. It requires prioritisation in the forthcoming Budget. The current projected shortfall of £1 billion for PC21 means that NI Water will no longer be able to deliver the essential works required to increase the capacity of its network and meet the current demand for water infrastructure. No doubt many of us will have read last week's press release from the Construction Employers Federation. The Member for Strangford referenced it. It is a stark reminder of the housing crisis that we face and the fact that current waste water constraints are holding back the building of as many as 19,000 new homes across Northern Ireland.

I know at first hand of that real-life impact, with every major town in my constituency featured on the Audit Office's list of waste water treatment works that are at or near capacity. Just before Easter, I visited the treatment works in the village of Dundrum, where development associations, trying to spur regeneration efforts in the area, are having to find creative and expensive ways of taking storm water out of combined systems to increase capacity in the waste water system and avoid statutory objections to their planning applications. While I welcome NI Water's willingness to work with developers and planners to find those creative solutions, it really should not have to be this way. It adds unnecessary costs to developers, costs that, as has been discussed, will ultimately be passed on to homebuyers and reflect wasted potential in our economy. Without those additional costs, housing and regeneration projects could move more quickly through the planning system, helping us meet the chronic lack of housing in Northern Ireland and move the economy forward.

With that in mind, I welcome the Audit Office's recommendation that the Department and NI Water complete a comprehensive review of alternative funding and governance arrangements. Our party has long expressed concern that the current model is unsustainable. We have, for example, supported the idea of mutualising NI Water with guidance from the Fiscal Council. To be clear, because this often gets lost in the commentary around the issue, mutualisation is not privatisation. Indeed, the Minister is right to rule

out any privatisation, the failure of which we can clearly see in England in the case of Thames Water, which is £18.3 billion in debt and last year dumped a record 72 billion litres of untreated raw sewage into waterways. The Thames Water model, in which the company has, for years, borrowed against assets to fund shareholder dividends rather than invest in upgrades to its asset base and has consistently hiked charges on consumers to keep itself afloat, is, of course, something that we must avoid.

**Mrs Erskine:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Brown:** Certainly.

**Mrs Erskine:** I thank the Member for raising Thames Water. He will remember that it was asked in Committee whether Northern Ireland Water and Northern Ireland were worse off than England as regards overflows. The answer was yes. That is particularly damning, is it not?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Brown:** I thank the Member; I am well aware of that. The intervention that she took from the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone also outlined that issue with regard to consent to discharge. It is a scary fact.

It must be noted that the mutualised Welsh Water has also faced significant issues over governance and transparency, but it is, at least, more accountable and follows a not-for-profit model, a model from which we can, potentially, learn lessons. Going down the route of mutualisation will still require careful stewardship, and any mutualised body must be structured in a way that ensures that households are not burdened with additional charges for water. A mutualised model for NI Water would require democratic oversight and transparent pricing in which the company would be able to borrow against its extensive asset base with loans secured by the public expenditure that NI Water would continue to receive for providing its vital service. That could be achieved by a separation of the charges already levied on water in the regional rate, for example. That would, essentially, be a change in how we account for that expenditure.

That is not privatisation in sheep's clothing and should not be automatically dismissed on the basis of ideology, which should not get in the way of a sustainable funding model for NI Water. Ultimately, the current funding constraints across the Executive and the lack of

a multi-year budget mean that NI Water will remain strategically and financially constrained. We cannot continue to tread water on this, Minister, and, unfortunately, blaming Tory austerity and pointing out funding shortfalls will not cut it. The Minister must wade through the detail and present clear and tangible solutions.

**Mr Durkan:** Let us be realistic: what we do or do not do today in this debate will have no major implications for our immediate future and for generations to come. However, unless the Executive take swift and meaningful action and make sufficient interventions, we will be in big, big trouble. Water infrastructure is a core issue, one that cuts across every facet of daily life. The budget outlook for NI Water is bleak, and infrastructure that dates back to the Victorian era cannot keep step with the demands of a modern society. A legacy of chronic underfunding has resulted in failing infrastructure. As Audit Office reports tell us, it poses serious environmental and economic risks and causing overspill into our lakes and rivers. At present, as we have heard, 19,000 proposed homes are unlikely to be built due to insufficient capacity. People and businesses have lived the consequences of system pressures and battled the devastation wrought by increased incidences of flash flooding, which, sadly, is a trend that is likely to continue as the climate crisis deepens.

In 2021, Minister Mallon recognised the imperative for investment across waste water and allowed NI Water to begin the task of addressing storm overflow and to kick off PC21. Yet, since 2023, DFI has signalled a move away from that enabling plan. At Committee, officials said that they were ready to deliver at pace but the massive cuts being imposed were forcing them to make unthinkable decisions. DFI has huge budgetary challenges, as do all Departments, but that is what the Executive signed up to. Across Departments and parties, there was a recognition of NI Water's role and the need to upgrade our infrastructure and move this place forward. However, underinvestment in water long predates these institutions. I concur entirely with Cathal Boylan's point on the impact of Tory austerity, although I agree with Patrick Brown that we cannot lay all of the blame at their door.

I am glad to see DUP recognition of the fact that investment in this area is key to driving economic growth and protecting the environment. That recognition was there in October 2021 when we debated the same issue. It is disappointing that the same party prevented any action by collapsing the Executive just four months later.

#### 4.15 pm

During the last mandate — a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, you will be aware of this — the housing supply strategy was published to great fanfare. It promised to remove barriers to increasing housing, including water and sewerage provision. I am interested to know what engagement there has been and is ongoing with DFC.

Without a joint departmental and wider collaborative approach to address the issues, we risk falling even further behind. The Executive must support DFI to deal not only with the historical underinvestment in the water network but with its ability to plan for the short and long term. It is vital that NI Water can utilise multi-year budgets to allow for stronger future planning.

As for the options — to come back to today's motion — at the current juncture, DFI should explore all the tools in its arsenal. We cannot oppose the motion just because we know or think that we will oppose some of the options brought forward; let us learn more about them. The SDLP also needs some convincing that mutualisation will not result in further charges for households, which we will never accept. Further hardship cannot be heaped on hard-pressed families who already struggle to make ends meet.

**Ms Armstrong:** I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with him: I do not want to see increased charges being put on any household. However, households in my constituency cannot access discretionary support because we are spending the budget on Northern Ireland Water and not on people who are in poverty. That causes an issue. The balancing act that we have to do in our Executive causes that type of difficulty, so we need to consider ways to balance that better.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Durkan:** Go raibh maith agat.

I thank the Member for her intervention. That, again, goes back to collaboration across Departments rather than the silo approach that we have seen for so long in this place and that has served no one well. It may have served parties well at certain times, but it has never served the public well.

We only need to look across the water to see the cost of privatisation not just to people but to

standards. The picture is nothing short of medieval, with sewage spilling on to the streets and analysts denouncing 35 years of privatisation as the biggest fraud story in the UK. I welcome the work of fellow Derry man Feargal Sharkey in shining a light on that scandal.

The Executive must work with Northern Ireland Water to identify income-generating opportunities such as renewable energy. We should learn from the example of other EU countries and embrace innovative solutions that allow water utilities to save costs and enhance resilience and financial viability. The future of water relies on improved collaboration between NI Water, stakeholders and Governments on both sides of the border, specifically on capital projects in border regions. Investment in our sewerage and waste water infrastructure that meets the needs of present and future generations must be a priority.

**Mr McReynolds:** I welcome the opportunity to speak to today's motion. I thank the proposer of the motion for stepping in at short notice to move it, and I thank the proposer of the amendment for bringing it forward for debate.

Since the restoration of the Assembly and the Executive, I have been fortunate to speak in multiple infrastructure debates, all of which noted the requirement for long-term, strategic and significant investment to deliver in a variety of ways for the population who live here. Today's debate is no different in that it is about facilitating clean and safe drinking water and sewerage for the 1.9 million people who live here and over 700,000 households and businesses. Those are fundamental human rights, but they also require significant financial cost and political will to deliver them. It is essential that we achieve that in a manner that is safe and accessible and does not discriminate against the most vulnerable in our society.

I am personally passionate about the issue, having studied the human right to water during my human rights law master's degree. It was then that I had my first visit to this place to meet multiple MLAs and hear a wide range of views on how they wanted to finance and work with Northern Ireland Water. I was reflecting on that over the weekend, and the conversations that I had over a decade ago are the same conversations that we are having today. We are talking about a Victorian sewerage network in desperate need of upgrade, significant funding pressures due to a historically fragmented and underfunded approach to water infrastructure

and how the inconsistent political stability of these institutions exacerbates those problems.

As we have heard, at the Infrastructure Committee we were fortunate enough to have the chief executive of Northern Ireland Water, Sara Venning, at our first meeting, which shows the importance that we place on the prioritisation of Northern Ireland Water during the mandate. She painted a bleak picture of the pressures facing the organisation. I welcome this motion on the current funding and governance models, which need to be reviewed, as my colleague Mr Brown detailed. However, I caution the Chamber that there is no single swift answer for remedying the various issues that face Northern Ireland Water; instead, like infrastructure and construction, it will require consistent, stable and functioning institutions supporting the organisation year in, year out, not a frequently collapsed Executive or a Department without a Minister.

We were meant to have multi-annual Budgets, but we have missed out on those. Multi-annual Budgets would have better served the long-term assets needed to deliver and manage water and would have given confidence to the construction, civil engineering, housing and business sectors, as they would see certainty in the future, rather than the unfortunate dysfunction of recent years and the year-by-year funding fluctuations.

It is important to highlight climate change and the fundamental role that our environment plays in addressing water quality. In 2023, we had our warmest year on record and our wettest since 2002. Alongside that, the degradation of our water treatment system is having an impact on our environment, with our combined sewer overflows directly linked to pollution incidents. In a climate emergency, that must change as we adapt to having to manage more water. As we heard, England is seeing similar and worse on a regular basis.

I am proud to be in a party that has vocally ruled out going down the privatisation route for delivering and managing water. That has proven time and time again to be a disaster on a global basis. Water must be recognised as a right to life, rather than being seen solely through an economic lens. That is why it is so important that we start treating our water and infrastructure sectors with the respect and attention that they deserve.

Lastly and against that backdrop, I encourage the Minister to explore the potential of nature-based solutions to reduce cost pressures by improving water quality at source and mitigating

flood risk. For example, extensive research has demonstrated the ability of trees to protect water bodies when they are planted close to pollution sources. Whilst I appreciate that Northern Ireland Water is working to install natural solutions where possible, it is vital that we work with the environment on a larger scale, and I would appreciate the Minister's commitment on that point.

We support today's motion and amendment. We are always happy to look at expert-led options and make evidence-based decisions. However, that must always have at its core political consistency and stability, the protection of our environment and, fundamentally, a rejection of privatisation and of placing increased financial burdens on the public. From here, our ability to build much-needed homes, our economy and, ultimately, Northern Ireland will benefit.

**Mr McGlone:** We in the SDLP welcome the motion. We believe that it offers the opportunity to explore the options without a commitment to restructure NI Water at this time. However, we need to be convinced that any restructuring will not result in water charges. As Mr Boylan said, such charges are entirely unacceptable, as, indeed, is the kind of profiteering and chaos that has been allowed to develop in England.

The amendment calls on the DUP and Sinn Féin to do what they have been unable or unwilling to do until now and agree to deliver the required investment in water and sewerage capacity. The Executive parties could and should increase investment in our water and sewerage infrastructure. The question is this: why do they not? The motion calls for an exploration of other ways to achieve that. Clearly, there needs to be increased investment, as the infrastructure is not fit for purpose.

The impact on our environment of the overflow of combined waste water and sewerage systems has been highlighted many times in the Chamber. The cross-departmental working group on Lough Neagh has recommended a cash injection of £131 million to NI Water for the upgrading of 18 waste water treatment works that have an impact on Lough Neagh. The recent report by the NI Comptroller and Auditor General on water quality in our rivers and lakes warns of the impact being felt now from the lack of investment in NI Water infrastructure over a prolonged period.

Economic development is being restricted because of the limited capacity of the infrastructure network. In many areas, new

businesses cannot be established, and existing businesses cannot expand, because the water, waste water and sewerage infrastructure does not have the capacity for them to do so. Indeed, the lack of capacity is moving us to the stage where local development plans are becoming hypotheses: notional ideas about the development of areas without realisation. NI Water has stated that the construction of 19,000 homes across Northern Ireland is at risk due to the lack of appropriate water and sewerage infrastructure.

NI Water knows what needs to be done to address the long-standing issues with the water infrastructure. It has completed the preparatory work, including designs and studies, but needs the funding. The current price control 21 agreement aimed to invest £2.1 billion in water infrastructure between 2021 and 2027, but it is increasingly clear that securing that funding is unachievable under the current funding model.

When I raised the issue of underinvestment in sewerage and water with the Minister in the Assembly on 5 March, the Minister first questioned the evidence for the impact of that underinvestment on the ecological crisis in Lough Neagh. He went on to state:

*"we have to broaden the conversation around how we deliver waste-water treatment works for certain developments."*  
— [Official Report (Hansard), 5 March 2024, p30, col 2].

That is what the motion does. However, the Minister appears to have already decided that the shortfall in funding can be made up by demanding that developers pay more. On 5 March, the Minister stated of the delivery of waste water treatment works for developments that:

*"It may not be funded directly by NI Water; it may have to be for developers."* — [Official Report (Hansard), 5 March 2024, p31, col 1].

It is not clear what assessment the Minister has made of that new approach, but there will be consequences. The costs involved in improving the capacity of our water and sewerage infrastructures are not negligible. Attempting to raise funding from developers will increase the unit cost per house in those developments — Mr Nesbitt referred to that — and there is likely to be a further reduction in the overall number of houses being built. Significantly, at a time when there is a crisis in demand for social housing, it will lessen the number of social housing units being built. Pushing the cost of

housing higher across the board will make social housing unaffordable for and unavailable to those who need it.

If the Minister is saying that the current model does not work, let us look at the alternatives. Let us look at what is being proposed today. When the Minister has already admitted to the Assembly that we will have to do things differently when it comes to increasing the capacity of water and sewerage infrastructure for those developments, let us look properly at the options and have an informed debate on the way forward. *Tacaím leis an rún agus leis an leasú. [Translation: I support the motion and the amendment.]*

**Mr Dunne:** As a member of the Infrastructure Committee and an MLA, I, like many others, am all too well aware of the serious issues and challenges that face the water infrastructure network in every part of our country. Economic growth and prosperity depends on us having a water and sewerage network that is fit for purpose for today and for the future. As has been mentioned, it is important to highlight at the outset that this is not a new issue; I think that most people here know that. Indeed, towards the end of the previous mandate, my party colleagues tabled a motion calling for a new strategy to enhance and expand our water and sewerage infrastructure network.

The recent Audit Office report on water infrastructure in Northern Ireland, which was published at the end of last month, highlights a number of key, important, stark and timely warnings for us all. The comments from the Comptroller and Auditor General on the report, in which she states that:

*"A very real consequence of this underinvestment is that there are many areas in Northern Ireland where new development, including the construction of homes and other buildings, is restricted due to insufficient capacity to connect to sewage and wastewater services."*

accurately summarise the situation that we find ourselves in.

There is no doubt that the running failure to address the underinvestment is severely hampering economic development and housebuilding in every corner of Northern Ireland. It is alarming that development in 100 areas, including 25 cities and towns, has been restricted due to the insufficient capacity to connect sewerage and waste water, something that we are all very aware of. Indeed, every month that passes without a sustainable

approach to meeting the current demand for connection to the network leads to further missed opportunities for the future, including opportunities to support business expansion, grow our economy and boost employment. That boost is greatly needed today, more than ever, and includes employment in our construction and aggregate sectors.

#### 4.30 pm

Opportunities are also being missed to provide new housing for those in great need of it. Indeed, just last month, a report highlighted that there are more than 46,000 households on the waiting list for a permanent home. That is a stark reminder of the need for action as we seek to develop new homes right across Northern Ireland and address our housing shortage. Even very modest domestic extensions or small-business and microbusiness adaptations can face very lengthy and costly delays or even refusals, stifling economic growth, investment and prosperity. That extends to major housing developments and the commercial sector, including new hotel builds, which are crucial to growing and developing our tourism sector.

Over the past 10 years, I have seen very welcome central investment by NI Water in the Kinnegar waste water treatment works in my constituency. I welcome the planned extensive upgrade of Kinnegar waste water treatment works that was recently announced — the Minister commented on that — and the planned construction of a new waste water pumping station in Sydenham, which is quite close to the boundary of my constituency.

The Audit Office report spells out very clearly that ongoing leakage from water pipes and sewers is contributing to pollution in our rivers and lakes. A number of other Members have also commented on that. The chief executive of NI Water, Sara Venning, recently told the Infrastructure Committee that we have more overflows, per head of population and kilometre of pipe, than the rest of the United Kingdom. From an environmental, socioeconomic and health perspective, that is a damning indictment that must be grappled with and action taken on.

The Audit Office report goes on to talk critically about the outdated oversight arrangements. It is extremely frustrating that, eight years after the start of major reform between the NIEA and NI Water, revised waste water compliance assessment arrangements have still not been implemented. The Minister urgently needs to complete a comprehensive review and action plan of reform to secure appropriate finance



and to invest in our water infrastructure, rather than simply repeating the mistakes and excuses of his predecessors in kicking the can down the road in the hope of avoiding difficult decisions.

**Mr Carroll:** The decision to turn NI Water into a company has been an unmitigated disaster. People warned that it would allow Stormont to underfund the service and open the door to privatisation and, potentially, water charges. Years of savage cuts to NI Water are wreaking havoc at every turn. The parties that imposed those cuts are telling us that ordinary people need to pay for their mistakes. In the past decade alone, NI Water has dumped some 70 tonnes of sewage into our waterways, which is an astounding figure.

Poor water infrastructure is preventing homes from being built, as we have heard, impacting on our drinking water and leaking sewage into vital natural resources, like Lough Neagh. Most Members, obviously, agree on those points. However, what we see today is a cynical attempt to use the real crisis faced by NI Water to privatise it and, potentially, introduce water charges. Let us call a spade a spade: that is exactly what the UUP motion and those who support it are asking for. You can call it what you want, but mutualisation is exactly privatisation. It is wrapped up differently and repackaged, but it is privatisation.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for giving way. If he checks the wording of the motion, he will see that we are not calling for mutualisation. We are calling for a review of how NI Water is governed, with nothing ruled out and nothing ruled in.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Carroll:** I appreciate that, but it mentions mutualisation and funding models to be looked at. Mutualisation is privatisation. Really, it is about squeezing more from people who pay for their water through rates and who should not have to pay twice. It will make hard-up communities pay to attract investment from private financiers — privatisation or, as some call it, mutualisation — whose only interest is to turn a profit and not in our water infrastructure. There is no denying the dysfunction of NI Water, but to point to mutualisation as a solution is no solution at all.

Wales was mentioned. Welsh Water has been mutualised, and people in Wales pay amongst the highest water bills on these islands: around

£500 a year. Welsh Water continues to illegally discharge sewage, in breach of dozens of permits, due to the state of its water infrastructure. People are not only paying again for their water but they are still crying out for investment in their water infrastructure. Arguing for water charges, mutualisation or privatisation on the basis that Britain has them is the argument for a race to the bottom.

The motion — the mutualisation of water services more generally — is a red herring. It is meant to distract from the fact that Stormont has failed to invest properly in NI Water. I agree that the Government need to embark on an ambitious plan to overhaul our water infrastructure for the benefit of all, but these plans are not very ambitious in and of themselves. Instead, we need to bring NI Water back into public ownership. Bring it in-house and allow it to be properly funded and run as a public body.

We have seen all the headlines stating that our water infrastructure will prevent the building of 19,000 homes, and there is probably a kernel of truth in that.

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

**Mr Carroll:** I will, yes.

**Mr Brown:** The Member talks about bringing NI Water into public ownership. Will he outline who the private owners are?

**Mr Carroll:** The Member supports mutualisation, and the last time I checked, I think his party is for water charges, too, unless it has changed that position. If it has changed it, I welcome that, and I will certainly check its most recent manifesto.

There is probably a kernel of truth about 19,000 homes being prevented from being built. However, where that theory becomes unstuck is that the Executive have no intention or plan to build 19,000 homes in the first instance. What we really need to see here is Government and state investment in our water infrastructure and public homes being built. Consecutive Executives have refused to do either, and we should not let today's motion distract us from that.

If this Executive want to talk about revenue-raising, we are for that discussion. We should have that discussion and talk about the fact that in the North, Belfast has more millionaires per capita than anywhere outside London or oil-rich Aberdeen, but you do not hear much about that

in this Building. We should talk about the fact that corporations are raking in billions at our expense, but nobody wants to talk about that. Also, there has been renewed talk about devolving corporation tax. I have heard no good argument against devolving corporation tax to raise it and make the rich pay their way to fund public services, including NI Water.

We will not support the quiet privatisation of our water infrastructure, we certainly will not vote to impose water charges on working-class people, and we will not be supporting the motion.

**Mr Easton:** At the outset, I reiterate my opposition to water charges. Our residents already pay for their water, and I am opposed to double taxation.

Water is vital to life, and an efficient sanitation system is vital to the health of everybody. We saw during the pandemic how we shared responsibility for public health, and access to clean water for all is a basic pillar of our public health system. For too long, there has been an extreme lack of investment in our infrastructure, which is now having a major impact on the system. That leads us to question how we are going to pay for the required work to upgrade our system. We need to have a mature conversation about where public money is being spent — and wasted — before we decide to increase the burden on hard-working families.

For decades, we have paid for water as part of our rates bills. Our bills used to be itemised years ago, but that was quietly removed. Itemisation needs to be reinstated so that we can see how much we are already paying for water infrastructure in our rates bills. I am concerned that having separate water charges could lead to a greater division between richer and poorer members of society. I am concerned about those people who are already making choices between heating their homes and eating having the added worry of having potable clean water, worrying about what it is going to cost them to run the washing machine or have showers for a whole family, for example.

Clearly, our infrastructure needs to be fixed as we are leaking away lots of our water due to the lack of investment. That needs to be addressed in a manner that does not add stress to those households already struggling to pay bills. Concerns have been raised many times about the governance procedures at Northern Ireland Water, as well as the value-for-money aspect. The issue is complex, but government bodies and Northern Ireland Water getting their house

in order and avoiding wastage is a priority that must come higher than implementing more charges on already struggling communities.

I also take issue with the consultation process that the Secretary of State launched several months ago. There were four questions to answer, none of which made it easy for people to say that they do not support water charges, so, in answering the questions, people need to be clear that they do not agree with their introduction.

I fully support the proposal for a proper plan on the matter from the Infrastructure Minister. That is necessary, for if we fail to plan, we plan to fail, which is not an option for residents or our business communities. My insight is that any imposition of charges would place an outrageous additional burden on Northern Ireland households, especially our low-income families, and inevitably exacerbate poverty that is already at unacceptable levels in this part of the United Kingdom.

In practical terms, we need the conversation's alternatives to be outlined. For instance, what would a public education campaign look like that addresses the incentives required for measures such as the installation of effective water conservation appliances? What more can government do on efficiency and addressing water leakages? Let us look to government, not to the consumer. I welcome the Infrastructure Minister's broadening of the conversation by involving stakeholders with Northern Ireland Water early on and learning from good practices, as previously noted in the House in connection with the Belfast Living with Water scheme.

In conclusion, I welcome the Minister's openness to doing things differently. A successful research-informed, evidence-based-options approach is the correct start, but I will not support the introduction of water charges.

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

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure):** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you very much, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.]* First, I thank the UUP for securing the debate on NI Water's funding model. I also send my best wishes to John Stewart and wish him a speedy recovery.

As Members know, NI Water was established in 2007 as a government-owned company — it is not a private enterprise but rather is wholly

government-owned — to provide water and sewerage services across the North. Since its establishment, it has been Executive policy to provide subsidy to NI Water in lieu of domestic water charging. Since 2007, nearly £3.5 billion has been invested in our water and waste water infrastructure. NI Water has reduced its efficiency gap with similar companies in England and Wales from 49% in 2007 to 5% today. It is therefore £65 million more efficient than it was in 2007, and that is a credit to NI Water. Indeed, planned improvements in operational efficiency between now and 2027 will save consumers £62 million.

NI Water delivers a high-quality service, and its status as a regulated utility company means that the Utility Regulator protects the interests of consumers by challenging NI Water to deliver high-quality, value-for-money water and sewerage services. As Members know, the Utility Regulator determines the total revenue requirement for NI Water through what is known as the price control process. For the period 2021-27, the Utility Regulator has determined that a capital investment of £2.1 billion is required to deliver the best value for customers and to deliver the much-needed services. At present, the Utility Regulator is undertaking a midterm review to determine the investment levels that are required for the remaining three years of the price control period. My Department awaits the outcome of that review, as it will, in the first instance, inform immediate 2024-25 Budget allocations.

I turn to the current funding position. To date, my Department has fully funded NI Water for the first three years of the price control period. Indeed, my Department has provided almost £90 million of capital funding over and above the funding level recommended by the Utility Regulator during the period. Although we provided significantly more funding than was required at the time, Members will appreciate — Cathal and others mentioned it — that rising costs, such as those of inflation and energy, have presented a huge challenge to NI Water in providing its services. The problem, however, is not how NI Water is governed. Rather, the issue is the level of public expenditure that is available to the Executive to allocate to NI Water. That is a consequence of the underfunding of public services in the North over many years. I am glad to say that, despite some comments in the Chamber today, all parties are united in engaging with the British Government to try to resolve that issue. All parties have accepted that this place is underfunded.

Let us not put this down to ideology or "the Tories this, the Tories the other"; all parties have accepted it, so it is a reality.

#### 4.45 pm

The question from today's debate is this: what happens when you underfund a public service for x number of years? In this instance, you end up with the challenges that NI Water has. Those are the consequences of the underfunding of public services in the North over many years, and, as I said, I am glad to see that all parties are united in engaging with the British Government to try to resolve the issue.

NI Water receives 70% of its revenue from my Department in the form of domestic subsidy, and for that reason, it has been classified as a non-departmental public body by the Office for National Statistics. As an NDPB, all of NI Water's capital and resource expenditure scores in the government Budget, so this means that it cannot borrow from external sources. However, it is also vital to note that, alongside the subsidy that it receives from my Department, NI Water, crucially, has had access to a government borrowing facility since its establishment. My Department provides NI Water with access to debt finance from a loan facility, and, to date, the organisation has borrowed £1.8 billion. Mr Nesbitt asked why NI Water pays interest. NI Water pays interest on the loan because it is established on a commercial basis. That is in government accountancy rules, and I am sure that he will appreciate that we have to abide by those rules.

The repayment of the loans also comes back into the Department, but, given our constrained financial position at the moment, it does not provide us with extra cover. That is an important point to highlight, as the levels of additional borrowing that NI Water would need to avail itself of in the future would need to be considered should its governance structure move away from NDPB status and should the cost of delivering its capital programmes rise beyond current levels. That will also be an important consideration, and I know that the Assembly broadly supports my position, and that of the Executive, that domestic households will not be charged for water.

The NI Water assets base is valued at around £4 billion. Its ability to borrow against that will be viable if it can demonstrate that it has a defined revenue stream outside government. Given its own prediction that it will need around £12 billion of borrowing up to 2050, it is my view that that may put the company on a potentially

precarious footing, were it to borrow in excess of its assets value.

The motion seeks an analysis and options for the restructuring of NI Water, including consideration of mutualisation. Before getting into that, I want to acknowledge that our water and sewerage infrastructure will undoubtedly need more investment to maintain what we have and to provide new infrastructure to keep pace with our ambitious plans for more social and affordable housing, economic growth and protecting the environment. NI Water has a plan and the expertise to achieve that. The price control determination includes ambitious targets aimed at reducing risk of property flooding, enhancing the natural environment and facilitating economic growth. However, funding will certainly be required to achieve those outcomes. Nevertheless, there is progress to be achieved with the resources available, and that will require all stakeholders to work constructively and responsibly to achieve the maximum benefits possible in the constrained circumstances.

I have spoken previously about the responsibility of developers, as Patsy McGlone and Patrick Brown said, and I make no apology for saying that, in some circumstances, it will be the responsibility of the developers to invest in the water infrastructure of their development. The construction industry and developers play a hugely important role in our economy. They provide important jobs — well-paid jobs, in many instances — but they are also a commercial entity. It is only right and proper that, when we are looking at development cases — we will take each one on its own merits — this question is asked: can the developers cover the cost of the water and waste water infrastructure that is required? I find it surprising that some Members completely rule that out and say that, under no circumstances, should developers be asked to do that. I put the question back to Members: why? Why should they not be asked?

**Mr K Buchanan:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Yes.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Minister, obviously, the developer will pay the cheque, but, fundamentally, he or she will pass it on to the homebuyer.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I ask the question again: why? Why is it automatically accepted that —?

**Ms Armstrong:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I will in a moment. Why is it automatically accepted by Members of the Legislative Assembly, whose job is to scrutinise all these matters, that the developer will pass that cost, completely and wholly, on to the buyer? It is our role, as legislators and people who are involved in scrutiny, to ask, "Why should you do that?" I am not saying that all developers will do it, but we should not automatically accept that costs will be passed on to the homebuyer. I will give way one more time, and then I will have to move on.

**Ms Armstrong:** Thank you very much, Minister. To be honest, I am with you on this one. I do not think that every developer should be able to connect and that is it. However, when it comes to, as Mr Nesbitt talked about, the development in our constituency, the developer did not find out until the end, and then the costs were being passed on to the owners.

The other thing that has me concerned, having spoken to Northern Ireland Water, is that there was potential, where developers had paid a bond for a connection to waste water treatment works, for Northern Ireland Water to hand back those bonds, which would mean that the houses would not be built.

**Mr O'Dowd:** [*Inaudible.*] I am not going to comment on that individual case, but most developers whom I meet are savvy businesspeople, so I doubt that they found out at the last minute. That may be the case in that instance, but I doubt it.

Turning to governance options, as recently as 2019, my Department established a working group to research and assess alternative funding models for NI Water. The scope of that work was wide, with consideration given to NI Water being able to avail itself of funding from within and outside the block grant, as well as access to borrowing, revenue-raising options and how its classification as an NDPB could be changed to give the company more financial flexibility.

Alternative classifications such as mutualisation were included in that research. While the principle of a mutual company reinvesting all profits back to customers would at first appear to have merits, it was determined that it would require a change in current funding policy. Fundamentally, a mutual company requires a guaranteed and predictable funding stream that is not subject to direct political control or competing public-sector priorities. Simply put, achieving mutualisation would require charges being paid by domestic water customers. It

would also require the relinquishing of Executive control over the company. Mutualisation leads directly to domestic water charges. There is no other way around it.

That goes back to a point that I made earlier about government and Treasury accountancy rules. This is set out within the rules. Wishful or hopeful thinking, or saying, "Perhaps it might not happen", does not cut it. The fact is that if you want to go down the mutualisation route — I do not and I will not — you will end up charging hard-pressed workers and families directly for water.

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

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am sorry: I have limited time.

Returning to my earlier point, that would also require a high degree of external market borrowing. As I stated earlier, NI Water has already borrowed in excess of £1.8 billion from the Government, and, as costs rise in future, further borrowing will be needed, introducing the risk that we will be setting the organisation on a trajectory whereby the largest portion of its income stream is serviced by debt. Thames Water comes to mind.

I do not need to remind Members of all that is happening in England at the moment. Mutualisation is not the solution that many think that it is. Indeed, a report published in June 2023 by the Consumer Council for Water in England and Wales concluded:

*"an overhaul and substantial change to the industry and company ownership would not address the main problems experienced within the water sector".*

The analysis to date has shown that there are no simple solutions. NI Water has been determined as an NDPB, given the continuing level of subsidy from my Department on which it is dependent. For us to keep that status and to keep it in government ownership, we need to continue down the current route. Furthermore, we need more public funding for the Executive. We need a debate around the Executive table about the Budget. The Chair of the Infrastructure Committee asked what conversations I have had around the Executive table. I have met the Finance Minister about my budget, as have other Ministers, and I have set out the challenges facing NI Water. I look forward to the debate around the Executive table in relation to funding for the Department for Infrastructure, and NI Water will be high on that agenda.

As I said, it is not the model that is important here. It is the fact that NI Water, along with all our public services, has been underfunded for many years, which has led to the challenges that we face today. I will end on this point. Last year, we invested half a billion pounds of public money in NI Water. NI Water is carrying out significant improvements across all our constituencies, but if you were a developer listening to the debate today, you would nearly think that we are closed for business. We are not closed for business.

I will give way, very quickly, to Mr Nesbitt.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Thank you, Minister. Are you rejecting the Northern Ireland Audit Office recommendation for a comprehensive review of alternative arrangements? Are you just ruling that out?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am not commenting on the Audit Office report for this reason —.

**A Member:** You are doing nothing.

**Mr O'Dowd:** As the Member will know, an Audit Office report has to go through the proper processes in that there is a protocol on how a Department responds to them. It may be taken on as a report by the Public Accounts Committee or it may not.

**A Member:** So, do nothing.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I will, when it is my time, respond to the Audit Office report. The Member said from a sedentary position that I will do nothing. I have already said what I am going to do. I am saying this to Members: stop talking the place down and start ensuring that investors know that we are open for business.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Keith Buchanan to make the winding-up speech on the amendment. Keith, you have five minutes.

**Mr K Buchanan:** First, I apologise for referring to the Minister as a Member. He is technically a Member, but I apologise for that.

I rise in support of the motion and our amendment. As we heard, NI Water is one of Northern Ireland's largest landowners, and it incorporates water treatment works, pumping stations, waste water treatment works and a vast network of water mains and sewers. NI Water supplies approximately 910,000 homes and businesses. Over many years, there has been a failure to address the underinvestment

in our waste water infrastructure, and that has severely hampered economic development and housebuilding in every part of Northern Ireland. Without the necessary investment in the network, there is reduced building work. As time passes without a sustainable approach to meeting the current demand for connection to the network, there are further infrastructure restrictions.

There are several examples of that restricting economic growth in Mid Ulster, and I am sure that other MLAs are aware of many more problems that building contractors encounter when development is hampered. In some cases, the contractor can get a connection to the foul system by reducing the volume of storm that enters it by a multiplication of 12. That means that, for every litre of foul water that is added to the system, 12 litres need to be removed and diverted to a storm connection or waterway at considerable cost. In the middle of a town or a built-up area, that can be challenging. In other examples, planning approval is given but no foul solution is available, and the developer builds the homes only for the homeowner to find out later that their dwelling has no formal sewerage connection available to it. Without the proper investment to support business expansion and new homes being built, there will be missed opportunities to boost employment in the construction sector and provide for need.

When it comes to addressing the crisis in capacity or, at a bare minimum, mitigating the current problems, a joined-up approach is vital. Any investment that is provided must be targeted to maximise added value and be screened against the potential to promote regional inequalities. We acknowledge the need to place more value on water and to take personal responsibility for the potential impact of our actions. We acknowledge that preventative measures need to be taken to reduce pollutants entering our waterways, and that will help to address the money that is spent on removing them through water treatment afterwards. No one disputes the fact that there is still some way to go to ensure that all sectors mitigate the risk to water quality. However, the causes of the current problems go much further than to one sector alone.

A series of questions was recently asked to the Minister on discharge points, and other Members touched on this. How are we measuring the water discharge volume — I mean the dissolved oxygen demand and the chemical oxygen demand — that goes into the water? Obviously, that needs to be monitored. Another Member referred to 75 tons of sewage.

How do we know that 75 tons of sewage were discharged into the water? There is no way of measuring that.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office report is clear that ongoing leakage from sewers is contributing to pollution in our rivers and lakes. The same level of accountability should be apparent in NI Water, yet there is a perception, rightly or wrongly, that there is a double standard. Does the Minister believe that discharge from combined sewers should be routinely monitored and recorded in order to get the exact figure and so that we know what the actual volume of liquid is when we have combined flow discharges into our rivers that, obviously, ultimately end up in Lough Neagh? Will the Minister ensure that there is a greater focus on surveilling where NI Water leaks occur, how often they occur and their impact?

I will now briefly move on —.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Will the Member give way on that point?

**Mr K Buchanan:** Yes.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Apologies to the Member; I meant to include this in my contribution. He mentioned monitoring discharges. Price control 21 includes funding for 700 event duration monitors to monitor overflows. Bathing waters and shellfish areas are being prioritised for the fitting of event duration monitors, so, there is progress, hopefully, on that.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** You do not get an extra minute.

**5.00 pm**

**Mr K Buchanan:** Thanks for that. I missed the number: was it 700?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Yes.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Yes. On that point, when Sara Venning was here, she referred to thousands of combined flow discharges. I appreciate that 700 is a step in the right direction.

I will briefly go through some points. Mike Nesbitt touched on the ageing network — a third of the pipes are 100 years old — and mentioned the housing shortfall. Deborah also mentioned social and affordable homes. The restriction of sewerage obviously affects homes more broadly. She also referred to overflows in

the system. Cathal talked about development challenges. Patrick Brown talked about treatment works being at capacity. All those points relate to development and building. The costs are obviously added on to homebuyers. If any developer says that they will take the full whack of that cost, I do not believe it. The developer will pass it on to some degree to the homebuyer.

Mark Durkan talked about a joint departmental approach and said that there should be no increase in charges. Peter McReynolds referred to a Victorian sewerage network. Patsy also talked about not having water charges and the increased cost for homeowners. Stephen talked about housing as well.

I will have to bring my remarks to an end. Thank you.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I appreciate that, Keith. Thank you.

I call Tom Elliott to conclude the debate and make a winding-up speech on the substantive motion. Tom, you have 10 minutes.

**Mr Elliott:** Thank you very much, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. It has been an interesting debate. I want, initially, to offer some defence to NI Water. I read some of its statistics on its website, and the Minister can correct me if they are wrong. NI Water was established as a government-owned company in April 2007. It supplies customers with approximately 560 million litres of good-quality drinking water every day. That is a huge amount of water going through the system. It collects approximately 330 million litres of waste water a day, and around 743,000 households and organisations are connected to the sewerage system, which transfers waste water to the works where it is treated and disposed of safely. However, 162 million litres of water a day were lost through leakages. Even NI Water's own target is 152 million litres of leakages a day. A huge amount of water goes to waste. That water has been treated at least four times through NI Water's systems, but it is going to waste.

It costs around £680 million each year to deliver water services in Northern Ireland. Thousands of assets, at a value of around £3 billion, are operated and maintained to provide those services. They include over 43,000 kilometres of water mains and sewers. In 2022-23, NI Water's daily running costs totalled £375.6 million; its operating profit was £105 million; and the profit after tax was £41.1 million. A dividend of £19 million was paid to DFI, which, by my

calculation, leaves a shortfall of £22 million missing. From that post-tax profit of £41 million, only £19 million revenue was given back to the Department for Infrastructure. Where did that other £22 million go, I wonder?

There may be an explanation for that, but to me, the key to it is that there are a significant number of processes. I understand that there are at least four treatment processes in the system to get drinking water to every household and business in Northern Ireland. Then, when the sewage comes back in, there are another four treatment processes to get it back out, not counting the water that may not have been treated that goes back into the system, which Mrs Erskine and others talked about. That is of huge concern to everyone. How can we improve on that? Is there any improvement on that system?

I will deal with the contributors. Mike Nesbitt opened the debate and talked about the three elements that require addressing: strategic investment, policy reform and governance changes. He and others highlighted that those are all in line with the Audit Office report. I take the Minister's point that he will not comment on the Audit Office report at this stage, but there has to be a response at some stage to establish whether we can have a review. Mike Nesbitt highlighted that there is significant need for a review of the system.

Deborah Erskine proposed the amendment and said that there were more overflows in the system than in other parts of the UK; I think that that is per capita or per mile of pipe. That is a worrying development. I listened to Cathal Boylan, and, true to form, he blamed the Tories. I accept his analogy. Mark Durkan made a similar point, but, at least, he said that there are other issues as well as the Tory austerity cuts. Patrick Brown reiterated the problems that are being created for new housing developments. He also supports mutualisation. At least some parties in the Chamber are singing from the same hymn sheet, but not all of them are. Peter McReynolds said rightly that there is no single solution to the problem. That is true. It is a combination of factors. That is why our motion recommends an overall review of the plans.

Pasty McGlone highlighted the problems with businesses. He said that they cannot expand, due to which there is a severe lack of investment in Northern Ireland. Stephen Dunne talked about the outdated oversight arrangements in the process. Gerry Carroll was clear in his thoughts: he said that the establishment of Northern Ireland Water was a disaster and that the basis of the motion is to

privatise water services. His recommendation is to bring Northern Ireland Water back into public ownership. I note that the Minister did not go that far, but, perhaps, we will hear his thoughts on the Audit Office report at a later stage.

**Mr Carroll:** I appreciate the Member giving way. The Member's colleague said that the motion does not mention mutualisation, but it does. How does his party respond to the Minister's point about mutualisation leading directly to water charges? How does his party square that, given the motion? The Alliance Party's manifesto in 2022 stated, on page 80, that it is for mutualisation, aka water charges.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I will not comment on the Alliance Party manifesto or its policies; the Alliance Party can do that for itself. I am coming to the point about mutualisation and how that could be managed. I think that Minister O'Dowd said that £2.1 billion is required to bring us up to standard. He explained the remit of Northern Ireland Water and the Utility Regulator. He asked the significant question of why developers should not be asked to pay. I see that point and, perhaps, accept part of it. However, he said that some may pay and some may not. How do you make the distinction? If they are going to pay, it has to be across the board; the same for them all.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for giving way. This is where early engagement with NI Water comes in. At the end of the day, it will be a decision that the developer has to make. If the developer believes that the project remains profitable even if they have to invest in it, the project will go ahead. If they do not, it will not. It simply cannot be ruled out and stated that developers will not contribute. As the Member said, let us be open to the question.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Minister for that. It is a good point. I am taking from him that, if the developer wants to pay and go ahead with the project, they can, but, if they do not want to pay, the project will not go ahead. If that is the proposal, that needs to be brought forward clearly so that developers know where they stand at an early stage. They should not have to commit huge expense around application fees and other aspects before they know exactly what they might be required to pay.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the Member for giving way. I have a brief point about NI Water's resources and its capacity to engage with developers. I know of about 400 houses that cannot be built because of delays with NI Water

and resources and stuff. However, they are under capacity themselves at the moment. That engagement with developers could take many months before we get a conclusion.

**Mr Elliott:** I take the Member's point, but that is one of the reasons why it needs to be laid out at a very early stage for the developers. They cannot go to all that expense and then be hit with a significant bill that they are not expecting from NI Water. There is merit in it. However, I hope that it will all be part of the review that we have put forward in the proposal.

Finally, I want to deal with the Minister's point on mutualisation, which, he said, would lead directly to water charges: it does not have to. Surely, a clause can be put in by the Department into the contract with whatever company takes on Northern Ireland Water or the mutualisation of it. You can say, "There are to be no charges", or "We cannot have direct water charges."

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

**Mr Elliott:** I am sorry; I am out of time, Mr Brown.

Finally, I should have declared an interest because I pay for my water twice. I pay for it through my rates, and, as a farmer, I pay direct water charges as well. I do not see why you cannot put a clause — this answers Mr Carroll's point — into any agreement with a company that takes on Northern Ireland Water saying that it cannot put in domestic charges.

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

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

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

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly recognises the failure of existing water and waste infrastructure to meet current and future demand; further recognises that existing funding models have restricted NI Water's ability to meet commitments to maintain and develop services for residential and business needs; believes additional investment in water and sewerage capacity throughout Northern Ireland is critical to driving economic growth, ending regional inequalities in provision and protecting the environment; and calls on the Minister for Infrastructure to provide a*



*detailed options paper on restructuring NI  
Water to include consideration of mutualisation.*

*Adjourned at 5.12 pm.*