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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 9 April 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Members' Statements

Mr Speaker: Members who wish to make a statement should rise in their place. Members who are called to make a statement will have up to three minutes in which to do so. I remind Members that interventions are not permitted, and I will not take points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Agriculture and Rural Communities: Challenges

Mr McAleer: In my capacity as Sinn Féin agriculture spokesperson, I welcome the opportunity to make some brief points. The Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee received a briefing from departmental officials on the Department's budget. I note that the Department's approach is to protect core front-line services as much as possible. I will highlight some of the challenges that agriculture faces and the fact that they are considerable.

Brexit has been a particular challenge. The EU common agricultural policy, although nobody suggested that it was perfect, provided funding certainty, through a seven-year multi-annual budget. Courtesy of Brexit, however, we do not have that financial certainty at this point. In addition, Brexit delivered a huge cut to rural funding. The ring-fenced budget for rural funding ended in December 2023. That funding had brought stability and certainty to rural communities. It provided the seven-year multi-annual budget for services and business development in local communities. There has been a reduction in the spend on the tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) programme in this financial year. Our party wants to see the TRPSI programme retained and adequately financed.

Most of the budget is ring-fenced for farm support payments, and I welcome DAERA officials' confirmation of a farm support budget of £332.5 million for 2024-25. Despite that

being welcome for this year, there is no clarity on a farm support budget beyond 2024-25. Our farmers and local food producers therefore have no certainty beyond that date.

We, as a party, want to see farm support continue, and a multi-year ring-fenced budget must be returned post-2024-25. Otherwise, a cliff edge will be created for our farmers and primary producers.

An issue of major financial concern is the bovine tuberculosis (bTB) eradication programme. Officials highlighted that the bTB programme costs £10.4 million and that, in 2022-23, £38 million in compensation was paid, which was up from £19.5 million in 2019-2020. Too many farms are impacted by bTB at present. If we can get control of the disease, it should free up money to support other aspects of farming. Indeed, the threats by the British Secretary of State, Chris Heaton-Harris, to impose new charges on farmers for bovine TB testing and make future cuts to compensation payments for TB are punitive.

In conclusion, farmers in rural communities are in the eye of the storm. Brexit, which I mentioned earlier, has had a huge impact. We have also witnessed climate change, —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McAleer: — and global issues such as war have had an inflationary impact on costs.

Entente Cordiale: 120th Anniversary

Mr Kingston: I wish to give recognition to the special and unique events that took place in London and Paris yesterday to mark the 120th anniversary of the Entente Cordiale. In 1904, the United Kingdom and France signed a series of agreements that became known as the Entente Cordiale, which ushered in a new era of friendship between the UK and France.

Yesterday, to mark the 120th anniversary, in our nation's capital, French soldiers took part,

for the first time, in the changing of the guard ceremony at Buckingham Palace. It included the playing of 'La Marseillaise' and the carrying of the French flag during the changing of the guard. It was the first time that soldiers from outside the Commonwealth have taken part in this prestigious ceremony. The Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh were there in place of the monarch at the ceremony. Edward and Sophie inspected the troops from both nations as they represented His Majesty King Charles, who continues his cancer treatment. We convey our congratulations to Charles and Camilla on their 19th wedding anniversary today.

Meanwhile, yesterday in Paris, at the same time, 16 soldiers from the Coldstream Guards took part in the changing of the guard at the Élysée Palace. They were not just the first British soldiers but the first from any nation outside France to take part in the ceremony. The ceremony included the singing of 'God Save the King' by a French military choir.

The military and diplomatic cooperation of the Entente Cordiale has endured through two world wars and subsequent conflicts. It laid a foundation for cooperation between our nations through NATO. It predated EU membership and, of course, demonstrates that UK cooperation with our European neighbours is valued and endures post-Brexit.

The United Kingdom and France are at a very high position by any measurement of soft power in the world, given their ability to have influence and be respected by other countries. Both nations are strong advocates for democracy and peace, promoting positive cultural and political values. In recognition of that enduring Anglo-French agreement, we say, "Vive la France" and "God save the King".

Childcare Costs

Ms Nicholl: On the first day back in this Chamber, we all sat here, and every party leader said that childcare was a priority. Alliance has been working hard on this over the past two years. We published details of proposals to reform childcare and reduce fees for parents. In November, when the spring Budget was announced, we warned that the increase in the minimum wage, while welcome, without support to cushion childcare providers would force them to close or to raise their fees and pass that on to parents. Here we are in April: fees have gone up; letters have come out today; and some providers are to announce yet more increases.

Childcare costs are out of control. We have said that many times in here, but it is depressing that it is now more true than ever. The Employers for Childcare survey that was published in March said:

"73% of providers have either increased their fees to parents since the start of 2024, or plan to do so before the end of June."

Those fee increases are part of an ongoing trend, and, worryingly, they may not be the end of the increases. Parents are feeling let down. I am constantly being contacted by people on the subject. One mother told me that she is moving back to Northern Ireland and is really happy to be coming back but is terrified about the cost of childcare. By talking about the issue and prioritising it, we have raised expectations. People are making life choices and decisions based on the hope that there is going to be support, and it is not coming. Words just are not enough; we need to see action.

The Minister said that there would be an update on options to deliver support for our children, parents and the sector after Easter. Easter has been and gone. We need more information on that from the Department's task and finish group. We need a timeline for the childcare strategy, and we need to see what interim support is going to be rolled out while a childcare strategy is developed and an affordable childcare scheme is rolled out. Parents just cannot deal with this anymore. They are struggling and are at their wits' end. People are having to choose between their careers and childcare, which is not in anyone's interest, least of all the child's. We urgently need an update from the Minister of Education and a commitment from everyone that this is not just words and that we will see delivery.

Road Closures

Mr Chambers: My statement is in regard to an issue that most of us in the Chamber, as elected representatives, have had to deal with at some time, namely road maintenance projects that require road closures. Some road closures will be for a short period and will only be in place during working hours, whereas others can involve longer-term 24/7 closures. Either can have a devastating impact on local businesses and cause inconvenience to local residents. They can have implications for public transport services and also have the potential to cause delays in the movement of emergency vehicles.

On 12 February, the Minister for Infrastructure announced that he was releasing £1 million of funding to tackle the growing scourge of potholes on our roads. That was to be divided equally between the four regional section offices. When further broken down into two or three council areas within a region, the final amount available may not have represented a huge amount for repairs, but it was, nonetheless, welcome.

Four days later, on 16 February, the Minister announced a major project of kerb replacement and resurfacing at the Groomsport roundabout, which is situated at the eastern end of the Bangor ring road. That single project was costed at £460,000. When a question for written answer was submitted to enquire how many representations by elected representatives or members of the public had been made for that work to be prioritised, the Department responded that it does not retain records of such requests. My suspicion is that there were no such requests to record.

That project was scheduled to last for six weeks. It was said that lane closures would be needed and that road closures would be required when resurfacing was being carried out. There was an undertaking that notice of the road closures would be published nearer the time. The busy Groomsport Road into Bangor was closed for a full week during working hours, and the Bangor Road into Groomsport was also closed for a full week, all before any resurfacing work had commenced. Neither of those closures was advertised. Translink services through Groomsport had to be diverted, with residents left standing at bus stops waiting for public transport that was not going to appear.

Some of the signage was misleading and, at one location, presented a major road safety hazard. Any common-sense representations made to the contractors fell on deaf ears. I appreciate that the Department has a legal responsibility to ensure the safety of the site workers, but it also has a responsibility to convey to the public and local residents in a timely and professional manner its intention to close roads and to use bespoke signage that is more informative and relevant to the local situation. Ironically, another major road closure is in place at that location this morning. Again, that was unannounced. Regrettably, it seems that lessons are never learned.

Downe Hospital: Endoscopy Services

Mr McGrath: I want to discuss my concern about the removal of the unit for the cleansing of endoscopy equipment at the Downe Hospital. I will go right from the start, because some critics will jump in to say that we are against transformation or we will potentially be accused of engaging in parish pump politics, and I have a letter here from the chief executive that states that the unit is being removed because of efficiencies and not because of any wider transformation programme. I do not think that it could be stated that a single change to an isolated service in order to improve efficiency is being done for the purpose of transformation. I just wanted to put that out there at the beginning.

10.45 am

Staff at that location in the Downe are absolutely hurt. They are hurt because they deliver the service in such a top-class way that they have an accreditation for it that staff at the Ulster Hospital — the service is being moved there — do not have. It is a bit difficult to understand why you would take a really good service that is working well and move it to somewhere else where the standard is at a different level.

Previously, the MO of the trust — I am clear that this does not refer to the current chief executive — was so transparent that it was embarrassing. The trust took the decision to completely run down a service and then, after a year or two, to review the service provision and close down the service that had been run down, saying, "It's because it is run down". I worry that the trust is removing the ability to clean the materials and the utensils, taking that service away, and, in a few years' time, if it reviews the service provision, it will say that, because that service is not there, it has to close it down. I want it recorded in Hansard, so that we can see that and that I stated that. If that is a consideration in the future, we will have this statement to refer to.

The staff at the Downe, the members of the Downe community health committee, which met about this last night, and all the elected representatives in the area sing from the same hymn sheet. We all shout the same thing, which is that the Downe Hospital can do so much more. It wants to contribute to addressing the waiting lists and to help. It wants to contribute to service delivery. It wants to play its part. The staff want to do that, and all the elected representatives in the area want to support that.

I wanted to make that statement, and I hope that, in the future, we see additional services at the Downe.

Glenshesk Road: Flood Damage

Mr McGuigan: Just before Easter, on 27 March, heavy rain and flooding caused a landslide and the partial collapse of the Glenshesk Road between Ballycastle and Armoy, which is in my constituency. Thankfully, given that traffic was flowing along the road at the time, there was no damage or impact other than to the road. The road is closed and blocked off at the site of the landslide, and, according to DFI, that will be the case for the foreseeable future. That, obviously, causes a lot of disruption for local residents, who are trying to go about their normal business, and will continue to do so while the reconstruction takes place.

Now that the Easter school holidays are over, the disruption has been compounded by the fact that the normal school bus route has been closed off to children attending schools in Ballycastle. From Sunday, through yesterday and to this morning, my local Sinn Féin colleagues and I received a lot of correspondence from parents who are dismayed at the lack of a contingency plan from the Education Authority and Translink to ensure that children living along that road get the transport that they are entitled to to their primary or secondary school.

With the safety of children being paramount and with the road likely to be closed between now and the school summer holidays and beyond, common sense must be applied to ensure that safe transport is provided for the affected schoolchildren. I have requested an urgent meeting with the Education Authority and Translink to discuss the issue. I hope and expect that that meeting will happen soon, and I appeal to both those statutory organisations to find a speedy, common-sense, sustainable resolution that permits children and their parents to get to school.

Rugby: Fermanagh and South Tyrone

Mrs Erskine: I would like to say massive congratulations to and highlight sporting successes in my constituency, mainly those of Enniskillen Rugby Football Club and Clogher Valley Rugby Football Club. As a keen rugby fan who has watched many games, I am very pleased to see local teams doing so well in their respective leagues.

Enniskillen rugby was victorious on Easter Monday, as the men's first team lifted the Towns Cup in its game against Ballymena. I offer huge congratulations to Enniskillen Rugby Football Club; I know that there was quite a bit of celebration. The Enniskillen ladies' team also has a big match on the horizon, so I wish it well for success later in the month.

At the weekend, Clogher Valley rugby club's first men's team, which was only promoted to the all-Ireland league last year, did it again and secured promotion to play in the All-Ireland League 2B next season, which is a fantastic achievement. Whilst the Clogher Valley men were on the pitch at the Cran in Fivemiletown, the ladies were at the Kingspan Stadium playing in the Suzanne Fleming Cup. It was the first final for a team that has been going for only a few years, which was a brilliant achievement for them. Unfortunately, they narrowly lost to Banbridge, but I have no doubt that we have not seen the last of the ladies at a final match.

Those clubs do amazing work in our community and have embarked on ambitious community hub projects. They are to be congratulated for that. Those trophies are the product of hard work and dedication not just by the players on the pitch but by the coaches and the scores of volunteers who work tirelessly for the club and the community.

Today, from the Assembly Chamber, we say, "Congratulations" to them and "Well done".

River Pollution

Mr Blair: I rise to make a statement on the subject of river pollution. I will attempt to highlight some of the practices that contribute to that and to make an appeal that all of us start to deal with the issue properly. Regrettably, I have all too often had to raise the matter of pollution since joining the Assembly in 2018, through comments here, correspondence to DAERA and, of course, through Assembly questions for oral and written answer.

Since the start of this year, I have had, through my constituency office, a number of reports of suspected pollution or threat of pollution on the Six Mile river due to slurry spreading in the Ballyclare and Doagh areas, in particular, in my South Antrim constituency. Those have been reported to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), and one incident has been confirmed as spreading during the closed season and is still being investigated. There have been many other incidents of pollution in my area over recent years.

I should point out that both NIEA and DAERA have been prompt with their follow-ups and replies to the points that I have raised with them. I also welcome the fact that the AERA Minister has committed to an environmental governance review and to tackling the environmental crisis at Lough Neagh. However, the scenes at Lough Neagh and on its shores last year and the fact that none of Northern Ireland's rivers is currently of good classification shows clearly that all policies and practices on this need serious and urgent review.

The south Antrim river to which I refer today flows into Lough Neagh, as do many other rivers, of course, in the lough's catchment area. In what remains of this Assembly mandate, we must consider those ecosystems and living environments and their survival carefully in policy, regulation and legislation. Alongside Alliance colleagues, I have stated that our waterways and Lough Neagh, in particular, need a series of actions from those of us who legislate. They include an independent environmental protection agency, as previously promised; increased fines and penalties for polluters; investment in our waste water infrastructure; support for nature-friendly farming; and the creation of a duty for inter-agency cooperation and an integrated management plan.

What I raise today is essentially a local issue, but the circumstances and the environmental threat could be replicated as an example of any of our waterways across Northern Ireland. Last month, I reflected publicly on the 'State of Our Rivers' report by the Rivers Trust in 2024, which told us that none of our rivers was of "good" overall status and that 12% were "poor" or "bad". Shortly after that, the Northern Ireland Audit Office's report on water quality highlighted no improvement in our river quality and diminished improvement in our lake quality since 2015. The lessons are clear: we must do better, and we must start to do better as soon as we can.

Mental Health

Mr Butler: As many Members will know, I have been the mental health spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party since 2016. I also sit on a number of all-party groups (APGs) and act as secretary for the all-party group on mental health. The APG is fortunate to work with the support of local mental health charity, MindWise. The APG has been hearing evidence over the past year from a wide range of experts on the subject of mental health and early intervention. In essence, it is about how

we can intervene at as early a stage as possible to ensure better mental health outcomes for our young people and children.

MindWise is asking elected representatives in a humorous and Northern Irish colloquial way to wise up — I have wanted to say that to a lot of you for a long time — but, in reality, it is not a laughing matter. MindWise is asking politicians and legislators — us in the Chamber — to wise up and support children and young people's mental health services. Young people in Northern Ireland today are grappling with significant mental health problems. Our community has long struggled with the stark reality that less than 8% of the overall budget for mental health provision is allocated to children and young people's mental health services. That has resulted in limited access to essential mental health support. MindWise recently launched a petition, available on its website, that urges all MLAs to advocate and champion the cause of our children and young people by pushing for and delivering an increase in funding for children and young people's mental health.

As we all know, the Minister of Health, Robin Swann, has never shied away from his desire to see additional investment across local mental health services. The previous mental health support fund that he established was transformational for the many dozens of groups that it helped. Now, while parts of the mental health strategy are starting to make a really positive change, the resources that have been made available to the Department ultimately still fall short of the £1.2 billion funding plan that all Executive parties committed to in order to deliver the strategy over 10 years.

Children and young people are among those who would benefit most from the strategy's being delivered through the necessary collective Executive effort, so, as the Minister of Finance and her Executive colleagues consider, in the weeks ahead, the allocation of funding for this year, I appeal to them to invest in the area where it can make the most difference and that sufficient allocation should go to the Department of Health, primarily for our young people, given the importance of transforming their mental health. I urge all Members to share the petition from MindWise and to support its fantastic work in providing support services for all those who live with mental health conditions and their carers.

Down GAA Centre of Excellence

Mrs Mason: I welcome the fact that plans for the development of a Down GAA centre of excellence at Ballykinlar continue to progress. My party has supported the development of a centre of excellence for many years. It will be a fantastic asset not only to our local sporting clubs and athletes but to the entire community. The benefits of sport to our young people's health and well-being are well known, and state-of-the-art facilities such as those planned for Ballykinlar will bring those benefits into the heart of County Down. We know that the GAA reaches far beyond sport; it also brings rich social and cultural benefits, often being the heartbeat of a community. That is the exciting opportunity that lies ahead for the village of Ballykinlar. We will continue to work throughout the process with Down GAA, the council and Departments to ensure that the project progresses as smoothly as possible in the time ahead.

Gaza War

Mr Sheehan: Today marks the end of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, when Muslims the world over observe a month of fasting, prayer and reflection. After Ramadan comes Eid al-Fitr, the celebration of the breaking of the fast. I have talked to Muslims in Belfast over the past few days, particularly to Palestinians, who feel that they are not in a position to discuss any sort of celebration in the current context of witnessing malnourished children in Gaza starving to death as a result of the policies of a brutal Israeli Government who have bombarded Gaza and slaughtered more than 33,000 people, almost 14,000 of them children and many others being women, the elderly and the infirm.

We saw last week the killing of aid workers. That was not the first time, but, maybe for the first time in Gaza, they were foreign aid workers. Over 200 aid workers have been killed during the ongoing genocide in Palestine, and we have seen levels of destruction that we have never seen before. It is time to end that genocide, and maybe the Western powers are beginning to realise that they helped to create a monster in Benjamin Netanyahu.

It is time to stop supplying him with the weapons of war that are being used for genocide and to kill innocent women, children and elderly people.

11.00 am

Of course, we in Ireland have experience of building peace and of peace processes. It is

now time for a ceasefire in Palestine. It is time to ensure that adequate aid gets into Gaza, that there is an end to the apartheid and occupation and that an independent and sovereign Palestinian state is established.

Mr Speaker: I call Gerry Carroll. Mr Carroll, you have two minutes.

Racism

Mr Carroll: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I extend my condolences to the family and friends of Josip Štok, a 31-year-old Croatian man who was brutally murdered by racist thugs in Clondalkin in Dublin a few days ago. I also extend my thoughts and solidarity to David Druzinac, who was beaten unconscious by the same gang. That tragic attack is what happens when the far right is allowed to spread hate about migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. It is what happens when a group of liars are emboldened to spin false narratives about anyone who does not fit their warped Irish archetype.

Of course, none of that started with the murder of Josip Štok. For a number of years now, North and South, we have seen racist agitators burn buildings, intimidate people out of their homes and organise openly racist demonstrations on our streets. In Belfast, we have seen migrants burnt out of their areas, racist signs erected by loyalist paramilitaries and Nazi flags erected outside a mosque in my constituency. Over the weekend, we saw the despicable racist graffiti that was sprayed on the home of Takura Makoni, and I take the opportunity once again to extend my solidarity to him and his family.

Those events are not representative of the majority here. They are not carried out in our name, and shame on those who carry out such attacks. They are the work of a tiny minority of racists who want to scapegoat minorities for the social ills that working-class communities face, including poverty, the housing crisis and a lack of healthcare provision. Not only does that let the Government off the hook but it is enabled by Governments across these islands who want to distract from their own failures. Racism is not innate to working-class communities, however. It is a top-down ideology that is peddled by Governments who want to divide us. The Tories, like Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, want us to focus on each other rather than on their blatant attacks on our communities, and we need to fight back against racism and condemn it everywhere that it appears.

Mr Speaker: That brings to a conclusion Members' statements.

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2023-24 and Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates: Vote On Account 2024-25

Mr Speaker: The next two motions are on the Supply resolution for the spring Supplementary Estimates 2023-24 and the Vote on Account 2024-25. There will be a single debate on both motions. The Minister will move the first motion and then commence the debate on the motions listed in the Order Paper. When all Members who wish to speak have done so, or when the time allocated for the debate has expired, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The Minister will then move the second motion, and the Question will be put on that motion. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

The Finance Minister is not in her place. I therefore ask the House to take its ease for a couple of minutes, and, if she is still not here, business on the matter will not be conducted today.

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £23,937,688,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2024 and that resources, not exceeding £28,817,828,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2024 as summarised for each Department or other public body in column 4 of table 2 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2023-2024 that was laid before the Assembly on 20 March 2024.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £15,724,763,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2025 and that resources, not exceeding £18,731,611,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2025, as summarised for each Department or other public body in column 4 of table 1 in the Northern Ireland Estimates Vote on Account 2024-2025 that was laid before the Assembly on 20 March 2024.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has allowed up to four and a half hours for the debate. The Minister will have 40 minutes to allocate at her discretion between proposing and making her winding-up speech. A representative of the Opposition will have 10 minutes in which to speak, as will the Chair of the Finance Committee. All other Members who are called to speak will have seven minutes. I call the Minister of Finance to open the debate on the motion.

Dr Archibald: This debate covers the Supply resolutions for the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) 2023-24, which cover the financial year that has just ended, and the Vote on Account for 2024-25. The spring Supplementary Estimates and Vote on Account are associated with the Budget Bill, which was passed by the Assembly on 20 February 2024 and received Royal Assent on 14 March 2024. That is now known as the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2024.

I would like to remind the Assembly that, in normal circumstances, the Executive would have agreed a series of monitoring rounds over the course of the 2023-24 financial year, resulting in a final planned position being agreed in early January 2024 to which these spring Supplementary Estimates would be written. In normal circumstances, the spring Supplementary Estimates and Vote on Account would be approved immediately prior to the Budget Bill being introduced. However, as I explained during the debate on the Budget Bill,

that was not possible this year due to the timing of the Executive's restoration and the need to wait for confirmation from the British Government as to the level of funding available to the Executive.

Work could therefore not be completed on preparing the spring Supplementary Estimates until shortly before the Easter recess in March. It was essential for the Budget Bill to be passed urgently so that Departments would not reach the cash limits set in the previous Northern Ireland Budget (No. 2) Act 2023. Once again, I would also like to reassure Members that this will not, in any way, be regarded as establishing a precedent.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Archibald: Yes.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister explain to the House what is the legal effect, if any, of passing retrospectively Supply resolutions for moneys that have already been spent? Is there really any purpose in a resolution such as this at this point?

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for his intervention. I will come on to that later in my speech. The figures that are being voted on today are those against which Departments will set their accounts when they prepare those.

I would like to thank Members for their support in delivering the Budget Act 2024 and, by doing so, securing the authority for Departments to deliver services through to the end of the 2023-24 financial year and on into the early months of this new financial year. The spring Supplementary Estimates for 2023-24 and the Vote on Account for 2024-25 have now been prepared and laid in the Assembly. While that is not taking place at the normal time, it remains an important step in the financial process. Once agreed by the Assembly, it will be against these spring Supplementary Estimates that the accounting officers of the Departments, and the other bodies contained in them, will account and their 2023-24 accounts will be prepared.

As I emphasised during the debate on the Budget Bill, the Vote on Account does not constitute setting a 2024-25 Budget. I have been engaging with my Executive colleagues on setting a 2024-25 Budget, and once the Executive have agreed that, I look forward to bringing it to the Assembly. That is not, however, the issue for debate today.

Since the Executive were restored, just over nine weeks ago, we have acted quickly and decisively. I announced over £1 billion of in-year allocations on 15 February to allow pay offers to be made to our public-sector workers and to help offset the pressures facing Departments. I have brought the Budget Bill through the Assembly to secure the delivery of services for the remainder of the 2023-24 financial year and on into the new financial year. Once the Executive have agreed their 2024-25 Budget, I will ensure that the Assembly has ample opportunity to fully consider the Budget (No. 2) Bill together with the 2024-25 Main Estimates.

I ask for Members' support for the resolution for the spring Supplementary Estimates 2023-24, together with the resolution for the Vote on Account 2024-25. I will conclude there, and I am happy to deal with any points of principle or detail that Members may wish to raise in relation to the Supply resolutions for the spring Supplementary Estimates 2023-24 and Vote on Account 2024-25.

Mr Speaker: I call Matthew O'Toole. Mr O'Toole, you have 10 minutes.

Mr O'Toole (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I will first speak as Chairperson of the Finance Committee and then I will make some remarks as leader of the Opposition.

The Finance Committee received a briefing from officials on the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account at its meeting on 20 March. On behalf of members, I thank officials. It is worth reminding Members that the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account relate to the 2023-24 Budget, as has just been said by the Minister. Usually the SSEs would be brought to the Assembly in February for approval, prior to the introduction of a Budget Bill. However, due to issues with Departments running out of money, the Finance Minister took the unusual step of bringing the Budget Bill 2024 to the Assembly in advance of the spring Supplementary Estimates being completed. Those spring Supplementary Estimates are what the Supply resolution debate today constitutes, together with the 2024-25 Vote on Account.

Members should be aware of the review of the financial process, following the passage of the Financial Reporting (Departments and Public Bodies) Act 2022, which resulted in a number of changes to how financial information is presented in these Estimates and in all Estimates documents and the associated

Budget Bills. Members will also be aware that, normally, there would have been a series of monitoring rounds over the 2023-24 financial year, resulting in a final plan and position being agreed in early January to which the SSEs would be written. However, the uncertainty over the total quantum of funding available and the need to wait for the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to confirm the detail of the financial package meant that it was only possible for Ministers to make a decision on 15 February on allocations to Departments to address overspends and provide funding for public-sector pay awards.

Since the Budget Act 2024, the Finance Minister announced the outcome of the Executive's "final plan" in her written ministerial statement on 15 February 2024, and Ministers have committed to constrain their Departments' expenditure, including pay awards, to the Budget allocation agreed by the Executive and not by the amount of headroom included in the spring Supplementary Estimates, if that is higher. The SSEs document sets out the provision included in the spring Supplementary Estimates beyond the outcome of the Executive's 2023-24 final plan. The Committee noted a number of functions that the Departments are carrying out on the sole authority of the Budget Act 2024. Those are highlighted by the use of a black box in the spring Supplementary Estimates document, which I am sure everybody has read in detail.

Members will be aware that the Vote on Account allows Departments to continue to deliver public services into the early months of the 2024-25 financial year. That does not constitute setting a 2024-25 Budget. The Committee has noted the larger than normal Vote on Account, 65% of the 2023-24 Budget, which would be sufficient to last until after the summer recess if necessary. Members have been assured, however, that the Minister and her Executive colleagues anticipate bringing the Main Estimates and a Budget (No. 2) Bill prior to the summer recess. In relation to the 2024-25 Budget, Members will also be aware of the Budget envelope that the Treasury has awarded the Executive through the Minister's written ministerial statement of 26 March.

The Committee knows that the picture is extremely challenging, even bleak. Members will be working hard between now and the summer recess to apply the appropriate level of scrutiny to the 2024-25 Budget. Members are aware that this debate is a largely technical exercise, and the Committee has applied an appropriate degree of scrutiny on that basis. While the timing and timescales are not ideal,

the Committee will support today's Supply resolution motions.

I will now speak as leader of the Opposition. As an Opposition, we will not force today's motions on the Vote on Account and the spring Supplementary Estimates to a Division, but I do want to make some important points about the context that we face, two and a bit months into the restoration of these institutions, and the financial and budgeting consequences therein. The spring Supplementary Estimates that we are debating today, as has already been said, relate to a financial year that has already passed. It is quite an interesting philosophical question to debate what would happen if we chose not to authorise money that has already been spent. It is a somewhat surreal position to be in.

Nevertheless, that is where we are, which is a consequence, in part, of our political dysfunction and the fact that we have not had political institutions for five of the past seven years. The fact that we have to do budgeting in this surreal, often backward looking, often hurried way is a product of our intense and repeated political dysfunction. It is a manifestation of our continued political failure, and it makes the point again, lest it need to be made, that we need to reform the way that our political institutions work so that they cannot simply be collapsed and so that Budget making cannot be thrown into chaos because the inability to set a Budget is, of course, one of the fundamental problems that is created when our institutions do not exist.

11.15 am

As I said, the spring Supplementary Estimates do not set a Budget. They do not even set a Budget looking backwards, let alone looking forwards. They adjust the level of headroom that is open to Departments, and today's debate is largely technical. However, the motion is substantive. It has a kind of legal effect, unlike the now more than a dozen motions that we have debated in the Chamber since we returned, which pledged support for, among other things — I do not have the full list in front of me — a childcare strategy; the cost of school uniforms; a strategy on ending violence against women and girls; capital investment in our fishing industry; a rescue plan for Lough Neagh; and, yesterday, a strategic framework for a shared future. All those motions were submitted by Executive parties. The list could go on.

What we are debating today is somewhat surreal, but it still has some kind of legal effect, unlike any of the motions that we have debated

over the past two and a bit months. The public, who have been crying out for political institutions to work and to deliver for them and who have seen video after video of Ministers, including the First Minister, talking about motions that are being passed here, would be forgiven for thinking that those motions, whether relating to childcare, ending violence against women and girls, waiting lists or Lough Neagh, have some kind of legal effect, create some new legal obligation on public bodies or commit a penny of spending towards those issues. However, they do not. They do not, because we have not yet properly got down to delivery in this place.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has made several statements on financial allocations, but we do not yet have a full-year Budget. To be clear, that is in breach of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which requires that we get a draft Budget statement for consultation before the end of the financial year. We have not had that. Now, that would be fine if we were going to get a comprehensive, costed plan for public service recovery, which is what the Assembly agreed to on 6 February. However, as far as I can tell, we are not going to get that.

We are not going to get a multi-year Budget. It is not even clear when we will get a single-year Budget, and it is not clear how that will prioritise any of the pressing issues that Executive parties have brought before the Assembly over the past two months, nor do we know when we will get a Programme for Government. The Executive parties have been meeting for the past nearly two years now. Even amid the political dysfunction, they met to discuss a potential Programme for Government, including, presumably, all the priorities that have been outlined by their members in the Chamber. Yesterday, however, when the First Minister was asked when we would see a Programme for Government, she said to my colleague Colin McGrath, "Let's not be in a hurry. Let's not rush ourselves after five of the past seven years not having any politics here. Let's not rush everyone into something like a plan for people. We can, of course, put down motion after motion, which implies to the people of Northern Ireland that childcare, the crisis at Lough Neagh, the waiting list crisis, help for holiday hunger and help for school uniforms are all being dealt with. We can, of course, imply that, but let's not be in a hurry to deliver a Programme for Government or a costed plan to deal with those things."

I say that because the two key strategic tools that we have, as an Assembly, to deliver change for people are a Programme for

Government, which sets out priorities, and Budget documents, which will be Budget statements that come ideally on a multi-year basis. We have not had either a multi-year Budget or a Programme for Government in close to a decade now. Those are the key strategic policymaking tools that we have to change people's lives — I mean the lives of the constituents who send us here — and we do not yet know when we will get either from a new Executive.

I welcome the fact that we have seen significant positive imagery and a joined-up collective approach, and I mean that. I genuinely and sincerely mean it. It is really important, in a divided society and plural society with a set of political institutions that require parties to work together, that we have seen that, particularly from the First Minister and deputy First Minister. However, the next step is the most important, and it is about actually delivering for people. It is about spending money that will improve people's lives, so I would like to hear from the Finance Minister about when we will see a full Budget statement, even if it is for a single year, and when and how that will be joined up to the priorities in a Programme for Government. That is, I am afraid, the least that the people who elect us can expect, because they have been promised, via motion after motion here, that we are dealing with their priorities.

I am pleased that we are here. I am pleased that we are, retrospectively, approving theoretical headroom for Departments — in some cases, for money that has already been spent in a financial year that has already passed — but it is much more important that we get down to the work of setting a Budget and passing laws to improve people's lives.

Mr Speaker: That was a fascinating piece of speed-reading for the first three minutes, Mr O'Toole.

Mr Sheehan: The underfunding of our public services here by the British Government is well known at this stage, but it is at junctures such as this that the impact of cuts to services is brought more sharply into focus. Although the Assembly has been back for only two months, the Education Committee has sifted through briefing after briefing that have at their core a similar message: there are not enough resources in the system to deliver the level of service that we want and expect for our children and young people and for those whom we charge with educating and nurturing them.

I was highly critical of the actions that were taken in the absence of an Education Minister,

when funding for vital programmes was slashed. The holiday hunger grant was cut. The Healthy Happy Minds programme ended. The provision of free digital learning devices for our most disadvantaged stopped, and so on. It baffles me that, in a system that is not resourced properly, officials do not seek to protect and prioritise the most disadvantaged. When I challenged the people from the Department on those cuts, they tried to tell me how difficult it was for them to do it. Imagine how difficult it was for the children and their families who had those vital supports taken away.

It is hugely positive that we have an Executive in place and locally elected Ministers taking decisions. Although we acknowledge that the British Government are failing in their responsibilities to people here in funding our public services, we must recognise that we have an Executive with locally elected Ministers in place. In my role as my party's education spokesperson, I have challenged the Education Minister on his responsibility to identify and set out his priorities for his Department. It is not good enough to simply say that you need more money; the Minister needs to tell us what he is going to do with the £3 billion that he has. I want to see the Minister setting out a plan to tackle educational underachievement, deliver affordable and accessible childcare and transform special educational needs provision. The key is early intervention. All the evidence tells us that investment at the early stage of a child's journey is far more impactful. That is why prioritisation is so important.

Many of the issues that we want to see action on are cross-cutting. One of the criticisms of the Assembly and Executive over the years has been that Departments often act in silos and do not talk to each other. Where shared objectives exist, Departments should, and must, work together and share funding and other resources to achieve them. It makes financial sense, it is a good approach to policy, and, at the end of the day, people want to see their political representatives working together in the interests of all.

I commend the Finance Minister on quickly making available the necessary funding so that a long-awaited pay offer could be made to our teachers. The Finance Minister made it clear that public-sector pay was a priority, and she backed that up immediately with action. The offer has been well received by teaching unions, and I hope that the awards will make a difference for workers. We now need to see the Education Minister working to deliver fair pay for our other workers who are involved in

providing services across our education system. Without those people, our education system would not function. They need to be properly valued and recognised for their work.

I thank the Finance Minister for her statement and for her efforts thus far in what are extremely challenging financial circumstances.

Mr Brett (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): My initial remarks are on behalf of the Committee and in my role as Chairman of the Committee. The Minister for the Economy recently provided written and oral briefings to the Committee on the spring Supplementary Estimates. I commend his ability to give the longest possible answers to the shortest possible questions during that evidence session. However, it is notable that, without the transparency provided by monitoring round statements, the Committee has struggled to track the changes in spending from the Main Estimates to the present. The Committee was provided with some clarity by the Department on those issues after our requests. That said, a number of matters remain outstanding, particularly in relation to slippage in spend on city deal funding.

Additionally, as I indicated in my contribution during the Budget Bill Second Stage, the Committee has had very little time to pursue and consider all of this. That said, I think that the Committee was relieved to note that, despite considerable funding pressures in 2023-24, delivery continued for key measurements, including particularly apprenticeships and skills. The Committee did note with concern, however, that, in the coming year, Executive funds will be needed to replace European social fund money, particularly for apprenticeships. That is something that the Committee is united in focusing on.

Another considerable pressure on the 2023-24 budget was the prospective pay settlement for further education (FE) lecturers. It is understood that, should negotiations prove to be protracted, the costs will be shown as accrual against the 2023-24 budget. As that process is understood to be ongoing, consequently, and not to prejudice those negotiations, in my role as Chair, my remarks will necessarily be limited at this stage. I will say simply that the Committee as a whole wants to see a speedy resolution to that pay settlement in recognition of the vital role that the further education sector plays in the delivery of the 10X strategy, which is, of course, the key economic vision that still remains within the Department for the Economy.

Finally in this role, the Committee recently sought clarity, but the Minister for the Economy was unable to help in respect of enhanced investment zones for Northern Ireland, so I ask whether the Finance Minister, in her winding-up speech, can give us any information on the anticipated package of tax breaks or reliefs that might be available to certain sectors of industry in Northern Ireland. That brings my remarks as Chair of the Committee to a close.

I just want to raise a few matters following on from the remarks made by the Member for West Belfast Pat Sheehan in relation to non-teaching staff. We need to see a speedy resolution to that. Yesterday, the Minister of Education stated that an updated business case has been submitted to the Minister of Finance. I am sure that I can say on behalf of the whole House that we hugely recognise the vital role that Education Authority (EA) bus drivers, classroom assistants, catering staff and domestic cleaners play within our schools, and we also recognise the need for them to be funded properly. Perhaps the Minister, in her winding-up speech, can say when she hopes that her Department may be able to approve that business case. It has been hugely disappointing that the Education Authority being unable to say how many members of staff it employs has resulted in this delay. However, we now need to move on and get that pay settlement sorted.

In my role as DUP economy spokesperson, I want to raise the issue of FE lecturers' pay. I do not think that the attitude or position adopted by the Minister for the Economy, namely, "It is nothing to do with me. This is a matter for negotiation between the sector and employees directly", is acceptable. We cannot on the one hand have Mr Sheehan claim the credit for the Finance Minister giving funding to teachers and then on the other hand have the Economy Minister saying it has nothing to do with him when it comes to settling pay for FE lecturers. They play a vital role in the economy right across Northern Ireland, and the Minister for the Economy needs to show leadership on this issue and get the sector sorted as soon as possible.

With that, I bring my remarks to an end. My party will support the motions this afternoon.

Mr Tennyson: I support the resolutions, though, in doing so, I am conscious that the debate on the spring Supplementary Estimates is largely academic given that the detailed spending plans have already been legislated for in the Budget Act.

It has been said that these are exceptional circumstances. They are, but too often in the Assembly is our Budget process exceptional: upended by stop-start Government and subsequently progressed, through necessity, hastily and in the absence of the levels of scrutiny and debate that the people whom we represent rightly deserve and expect. That is why Alliance has consistently and persistently advocated for the reform of these institutions.

There is no point in other parties coming to the Chamber to bemoan the process that we are in or the damage to our public services and public finances caused by repeated suspension if they are not willing to commit to the reform that is necessary to ensure that it never happens again.

11.30 am

In recent debates on the Budget Bill and on public-sector pay, successive MLAs from the two largest parties pretended that there was no consequence from not having had a Government in five of the past seven years and that we merely stood still. That is a convenient lie, told to justify the huge damage that has been done. That damage was evident in the Main Estimates predicated on the Secretary of State's punishment Budget, which implemented a swathe of cuts across the public sector that could not be undone in the final few weeks of the previous financial year.

The most significant movements from the Main Estimates to the spring Supplementary Estimates are a result of the financial package that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury confirmed on 15 February. I will address some of the issues pertaining to that pot of money.

There is no doubt that the over £1 billion made available in 2023-24 has provided much-needed relief to public services, as well as significant and welcome progress on addressing a range of outstanding public-sector pay claims. In previous debates, I have raised the issue of non-teaching pay, as Mr Brett has done today. I recognise the progress that has been made by the Department of Education and the Department of Finance since restoration. It is welcome, and I trust that the matter can be resolved swiftly.

It has been well rehearsed by now, however — I will not dwell on the point — that the package in its entirety did not provide long-term stability. There is an urgent need for a renewed fiscal framework and a properly baselined fiscal floor, set at the appropriate level. The challenges

pertaining to underfunding are perhaps evident nowhere more so than in our justice system. Since justice was devolved, the Department of Health has seen an increase in its budget of 68%, while the Department of Education has seen one of over 35%. Meanwhile, the Department of Justice has seen an increase of just 3%. That is further compounded by the fact that, as more and more people fall through the gaps in service elsewhere in the system — be it in mental health, addiction, early years, education, employment or housing — more and more falls to the Department of Justice as the provider of first and last resort. I do not believe that anyone in the Assembly can argue that, despite dwindling police numbers and pressure on prison capacity, the current funding arrangements are adequate to meet the needs of victims or our wider community. No doubt, during today's debate, a similar story of pressure across the public sector will be told.

While I entirely respect the fact that negotiations on our funding arrangements with Treasury are ongoing, I am concerned that, seven weeks on from the previous debate on the Budget Bill, we do not have a great deal more insight into the direction of travel: the powers being sought for fiscal devolution; how the Minister intends to address conditionality around revenue raising; and whether and when an independent commission to advise on our funding formula will be established. Given the impending spending review within the next year, the urgency cannot be overstated.

Another challenge arising from the UK Government's financial package has been the removal of ring fencing for Fresh Start funding for integrated schools. It is important to emphasise that, while ring fencing has been removed, the money has not been and is not lost to the Executive. It is disappointing that, despite requests, there appears to have been no serious effort by the Finance Minister or the Education Minister to re-profile that money for its original purpose, which was to support integrated education and to seek to educate more of our children together. That is vital for our society and for our education system's financial stability.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Tennyson: I will, yes.

Mr O'Toole: Does the Member agree that it is really important that, in talking about this, no one should be in any doubt that he is right that Chris Heaton-Harris and the UK Government imposed a punishment Budget? We know that

we have had more than a decade of austerity, but the decision on the cuts to integrated education was effectively one made by the Executive, particularly by the two Ministers about whom he has talked. Yes, the ring fence was removed, but that did not in any way impose a decision on any Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive to remove that money.

Mr Tennyson: It is important that we are accurate about this. In fairness to the Ministers, the decision to remove ring fencing was not theirs. The Member said that, and it is important that we are accurate about it. Capital money has been found for other projects, however, so it is a question of priority as to whether the Ministers want to return that money to its originally intended purpose and provide funding for the 10 integrated projects. They absolutely should.

While I would be the first to argue that Northern Ireland has been chronically underfunded in recent years and that a failed policy of Tory austerity has decimated our public services and damaged our economy, we cannot shirk our responsibilities to deliver a programme of public-sector transformation in this place. Indeed, if we are to secure substantive progress in negotiations with Treasury, we must demonstrate that we are serious partners and are able to take the long-term decisions necessary to improve efficiency and outcomes for the people whom we represent. It was therefore galling to be present at the debate yesterday on the future of funding for NI Water, during which the Minister could not even commit to an expert-led review of the funding and governance arrangements of that organisation, despite the Northern Ireland Audit Office's clear recommendations. Taking an ostrich approach, despite the overflows polluting our rivers and Lough Neagh and the constraints on development hampering housing supply and damaging our economy, is an abdication of responsibility and is symptomatic of the inertia that has pervaded successive Executives and walked us to the financial and environmental challenges that we now face as an Executive.

I support the resolutions today, but I will put down a marker at this stage: going forward to the Main Estimates and the Budget Bill for this year, we need to see a step change in approach. We must return at the earliest opportunity to multi-year budgets, properly invest in the transformation of our services and learn from international best practice on green budgeting to ensure that our Budget process

better protects our environment and upholds our climate commitments.

Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I speak as Chair of the AERA Committee. I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Committee. In February, the Committee received a briefing from DAERA officials on the budgetary pressures of 2023-24 and those of 2024-25 and beyond. We also held an extra meeting in March with Minister Muir to hear his priorities and to discuss budgetary pressures. The Committee welcomed that meeting, and we look forward to scrutinising the work of the Department as we move forward.

The Committee was pleased that the Minister shared its views that nothing will be gained from pitting agriculture and the environment against each other. He advised us that, during his term, he intends to support our agriculture, food and fisheries sectors, alongside the important rural communities, while benefiting the climate and the environment. The Committee has continued to hear from officials and stakeholders across the DAERA business areas and is building a picture of where our scrutiny focus will need to be when it comes to the budget.

Before I highlight some of the 2023-24 challenges and those that extend into 2024-25, I note on behalf of the Committee that the Budget process in which we find ourselves is unusual, as has been outlined by other Members. In usual circumstances, the spring Supplementary Estimates and the associated Budget Act are connected to the outcome of the in-year monitoring rounds. We are not, however, in those usual times, and it was only possible for the Executive to decide on 15 February the allocations to Departments to address overspends and provide funding for public-sector pay awards.

The Vote on Account is approximately 65% of the previous year's Budget to ensure that it will be sufficient to last until the summer recess if necessary. We know that the timescale for agreeing a Budget will be extended to allow Ministers to determine spending priorities. The Committee looks forward to influencing that process in the future. As a public consultation on the 2024-25 Budget will not take place, it is even more important that the Department engages with the Committee as soon as possible.

For 2023-24, officials advised the Committee that the resource expenditure limits included £600.7 million of non-ring-fenced resource and

that almost £330 million is earmarked by His Majesty's Treasury for agriculture, agri-environment, the wider rural economy and fisheries. Treasury has further earmarked just over £28 million for non-ring-fenced resource expenditures for work on the Northern Ireland protocol and Windsor framework and at points of entry. The Committee heard that most of the remaining funding relates to staff costs, the bovine TB programme and other running costs.

I now will draw attention to a few budgetary challenges of the past year that have come to the Committee's attention and to some that will go forward into 2024-25. Bovine TB is one of the most challenging issues facing cattle farmers in Northern Ireland, with high herd incidence of close to 10%. In the previous financial year, £53 million was spent on bovine TB, £38 million of which paid the value of cattle that were slaughtered for disease control. A similar amount is expected to be paid this year. When the Minister briefed us on 5 March, he shared our concerns about the need to deal with that escalating matter. However, our Committee wishes to see the Minister go beyond paying just for the cattle that are lost and cover the full amount of lost income to farmers, for it to be true compensation. It takes time to rebuild a herd, never mind the emotional distress and the financial input over generations to develop improved stock genetics. The Committee will also monitor the outcome of the Secretary of State's consultation, inherited by Minister Muir, on the proposals to reduce bovine TB compensation.

On the implementation of the Windsor framework, the Committee was advised that, in year, DAERA was awarded resource expenditure allocations totalling £28.2 million for 2023-24 under three funding streams. The Committee is aware that staff costs of £18.6 million are the greatest expense to operate the inspection regime along with support staff both on- and off-site. DAERA received only £4.7 million of its bid for £5.6 million for 2023-24 from Treasury. That brings significant uncertainty to the process, given that the Department was not allocated what it bid for. The UK Government's wish to ensure the smooth implementation of the Windsor framework will not be possible if DAERA is not properly supported to implement it. The Committee is aware that rural development funding and support are more pressurised due to EU exit and was pleased to hear that that will be a focus for the Minister.

The Committee expressed concern about the reduced spend in 2023-24 on tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI). DAERA

advised that several initiatives, including the rural business development grant scheme, were not delivered in 2023-24 due to the need to undertake evaluations.

The Committee looks forward to seeing the climate action plan. The Minister highlighted to us that investing in addressing climate change is an opportunity to go with the green growth agenda. The Committee assumes that it will see funding prioritised for that green growth agenda. We know that the Minister shares our interest in supporting the agriculture sector to play its part in climate actions; for example, delivering finance to ensure that there is research to improve technology and to invest in a just transition. We are keen to establish when the £2.3 billion will be available from the Departments to implement the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 up to 2027, which is just three years away.

The Committee is concerned that the farm support programme has not kept pace with inflation. We asked the Minister to ensure that the budgets that come to Northern Ireland support our valuable sectors across agriculture, the environment and rural affairs.

Mr McAleer: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the Supply resolution debate. As I said in my Member's statement, there are many issues facing the farming community. The Committee Chair touched on the some of those during his contribution, such as the reduction in spend on TRPSI. As we know, the tackling rural poverty and social isolation programme is an example of a relatively small amount of money going a long way in rural communities to deliver projects and programmes on the ground. We also know that farm support has not kept pace with inflation.

As I mentioned earlier, Brexit has had a huge detrimental impact. Now that we are out of the common agricultural policy, which was not perfect but did provide a seven-year budget, a level of uncertainty has been created. Certainly, we welcome the £332.5 million for single farm payments in the 2024-25 financial year. As we know, that is really important income support for food-producing families and farms. We know that it is also important in keeping the cost down for consumers. While we welcome that funding for this year, the danger is that we have no future certainty about it. If we do not get certainty from the British Government, who pledged, pre-Brexit, that they would replace lost EU funding pound for pound, and if that ring-fenced budget is not continued, it could create a cliff edge for our farmers.

11.45 am

The TB costs are in the region of £50 million. There is £38 million for compensation and just over £10 million for running the programme. The Department needs to get to grips with that, because if that cost could be brought down, it would free up additional funding and expenditure for other aspects of farm and rural support. Indeed, we were very scathing about the threats that were made by the Secretary of State, Chris Heaton-Harris, to impose new charges on farmers for bovine TB testing and future cuts to compensation. We feel that those are very punitive.

Farming and rural affairs are in the eye of a storm. We have Brexit, climate change and other world events like war, which have had a huge inflationary impact on input costs. That has all added to a sense of uncertainty. We call on the British Government to live up to their pre-Brexit pledge to replace EU funding pound for pound, because our farmers and rural communities need that degree of certainty.

Mrs Erskine (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): As already stated, the Assembly finds itself in the unique position of agreeing to the spring Supplementary Estimates for the previous financial year and to the Vote on Account for the current financial year, with a significantly truncated time frame. As a result, the Committee for Infrastructure has not been afforded the opportunity to fully understand and consider the financial position for 2023-2024 and future resource requirements for the Department for Infrastructure in 2024-25.

It is essential that Committees have sufficient time to explore, scrutinise and fully understand their respective Departments' financial positions so that they can fully exercise their advisory and scrutiny functions. To that end, I welcome the Minister of Finance's previous assurance that this approach will not set a precedent for future financial scrutiny or Budget cycles.

Over recent weeks, the Committee has taken evidence covering all aspects of the Department's remit that relates to roads, water and transport. We are all aware that our road network has lacked the required funding to maintain it to the standard that, as road users, we rightly expect. Whilst the Committee welcomed the additional funding allocations to the Department in order to provide additional resource for remedial works to be undertaken, the totality of spending in 2023-24 is still way below the resource requirements that are

needed to provide a fully funded road maintenance programme.

I concur with the Minister for Infrastructure's assertion that our infrastructure plays an important role in the daily life of people, the community, the environment and the economy. I am confident that, over the coming weeks, the Committee will wish to review in detail the Department's financial performance for the 2023-24 financial year once the final out-turn figures have been published.

Turning to the current financial year, I will say that the Committee has received oral and written evidence from the Minister and departmental officials to get a sense of the resource requirements that are needed to deliver the services for transport, water and planning, which we often take for granted. From the evidence that has been received, it is clear that the Department faces a number of very significant challenges, particularly in maintaining and updating our water and waste water network and in delivering timely MOT services for motorists and vehicle dealerships at the point of need.

Evidence to the Committee has highlighted the stark reality that much of our water infrastructure desperately requires substantial work to provide capacity in the system for communities and businesses. That work will, however, require significant capital investment to ensure that our infrastructure is fit for purpose, to deliver for existing users, to provide for the construction of new homes and businesses and to attract new investment to develop and grow our economy.

Turning to transport matters, I welcome the investment made to increase testing capacity. That increase arises from the new centre at Hydebank and the development of a new transport hub in Belfast. If the forecasts are accurate, we will see a significant increase in passenger numbers, which will assist in the transition from private vehicles to public transport. That is critical if we are to deliver on the commitments arising from the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. It is also critical, however, that sufficient consideration be given to projects that are not solely Belfast-centric. Naturally, I recognise that, as a capital city, Belfast needs the necessary infrastructure, but the need for investment in other regions should not be understated. If we want to realise the ambition of increasing uptake of public transport, future investment is an absolute priority.

The Committee is keen to work collaboratively with the Minister for Infrastructure and with the Department to identify ways to deliver the services that our communities need. I recognise that financial pressures will constrain ambitions, but I am confident that the Committee will endeavour to nurture a positive relationship in seeking to identify solutions to the challenges that we undoubtedly face.

I will make some brief remarks as DUP representative for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Infrastructure is the bedrock of Executive delivery on aspects of the Programme for Government and its projects. Without adequate funding, it will be impossible to deliver on some of the essential things such as social and affordable homes, boosting our economy by providing more jobs in, for example, the construction industry and environmental improvements. In yesterday's debate about funding for Northern Ireland Water, we heard that Northern Ireland potentially has thousands of overflows that contribute to pollution in our waterways. There is a need, therefore, to look at the matter in the context of Lough Neagh and other areas; I raised that with the First Minister during Question Time, yesterday.

Not least of the essential aspects is decarbonisation: ensuring that we meet our net zero targets by getting people to switch to public transport. That is a significant challenge in my constituency and in rural areas. Public transport is infrequent in many rural towns and villages and needs significant investment. Another of those aspects is the carrying out of health reform, for which we will set up regional centres of excellence and ask people to travel for their appointments. We must ensure that the aims and ideas for health transformation, as set out in the Bengoa report, are reflected in better transportation not only from a public transport point of view but from a road safety perspective.

There are, undoubtedly, challenges facing our overall Budget position. It is important that we get it right. Further to that, it is important that we are innovative in how we do business and that we take hard decisions.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs Erskine: We must ensure that our public services are properly funded to carry out the work that the people of Northern Ireland rightly deserve.

Mr Mathison (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I rise to speak to

the Supply resolutions. I will do so, first, as the Chairperson of the Education Committee. Since the return of the Assembly in February, the Committee has been engaged in intensive work, hearing from key education stakeholders and, of course, directly from the Department. As other Members referenced, however, the Committee has had less time than it would have liked in order to properly understand the financial position for the previous year and the year ahead.

It is clear that the Department's budget is under substantial pressure. That was the case in the previous financial year and will be in the year ahead, as we look to the Vote on Account. Officials have indicated to the Committee that, in a flat-cash budgetary position, pressures of around £900 million will be faced. That is felt at every level of the education system: school budgets, Youth Services, SEN services and targeted programmes to tackle educational disadvantage and to improve mental well-being in schools.

The Committee has focused on SEN in some detail — rightly so, given the pressure on places that faces us in September. There has been an 88% increase in total SEN spend from £255 million in 2017-18 to £479 million in 2022-23. The Minister has suggested, looking ahead, that an extra £100 million in capital budget will be required to fund the capital works to deliver SEN places, and also that the SEN transformation programme itself needs another £11 million in funding. In this context, the Committee shares the concern of the Children's Commissioner that the cuts in education, over the previous year and years before that, have disproportionately affected our children and young people. The Committee has consistently highlighted that the Department's budget is not sufficiently targeted at early interventions for children with additional needs, for those impacted by social disadvantage or in early interventions in early years specifically. Education has typically survived in recent years on a cycle of bailouts, often via monitoring rounds, and this can only be broken by a commitment to transformation of service delivery.

The Committee has not yet had the opportunity to examine the Department's transformation plans, but it is clear that this work is urgently required, and the Committee will turn its focus to the issue in the months ahead. Early discussions in Committee considered teachers' pay and the ongoing industrial dispute, and we welcome the significant progress made to resolve that. The Committee has also expressed its support for seeing progress and

delivery of the pay and grading review for education support staff. However, members are very mindful of the challenges facing us in finding the recurring budget to finance these pay agreements in the years ahead. The Committee will continue to scrutinise the Minister and Department in these challenging financial times to support delivery on key issues but also to ensure that the Department brings forward a meaningful reform and transformation programme.

I will now make some remarks in my capacity as Alliance's education spokesperson and as an MLA for Strangford. It is clear, as has been referenced by many other Members, that we are again in a less than desirable position with regard to our Budget scrutiny in this place. These Supply resolutions should have been laid before the Budget Bill earlier this year, but we are all aware that that Bill passed without the provision of Supplementary Estimates. Departments were facing real risks of exceeding spending limits and running out of cash in some cases, but it was uniformly agreed across the Chamber that the process we were engaged in was suboptimal, to say the least. The rushed Budget, and the less than satisfactory scrutiny process associated with it, is a direct result of the decisions of some to collapse the Assembly. It is vital that we do not find ourselves in this position again and that all parties get behind supporting the reform needed to ensure that the veto is removed from politics in Northern Ireland for good.

As already outlined, this has been an incredibly challenging year for education from a budgetary perspective, and the year ahead looks set to continue in a similar vein. We know that, for many areas, significant additional resources are required over and above what the Department's regular statutory functions cover. A good example of that is the early learning and childcare strategy: something that every party in the Chamber supports, but the resource required to deliver it is still to be found. Ultimately, this speaks to the need to reform how Northern Ireland is funded. It is an urgent necessity that our funding settlement is adjusted to reflect our level of objective need. All parties need to maintain the focus of moving beyond the UK Government's acceptance that we are, indeed, underfunded and to delivering a settlement that genuinely reflects our level of need with an appropriate fiscal floor.

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

To that, I add that we need our Education Minister to demonstrate a genuine commitment

to delivering transformation of our education system. We need a clear plan to both assess and tackle the cost of division in our education system, a system divided both on community lines and socio-economic lines. In that regard, I echo the comments from my colleague, Eóin Tennyson. I was disappointed that the Minister did not begin his tenure by restoring the ring-fencing of Fresh Start funding to allow integrated capital projects to progress. I urge him to reconsider this position. I would welcome clarification from the Finance Minister on what steps she took to consider the possibility of restoring that ring-fencing of the Fresh Start funding.

We need to see delivery reform across many areas, not least for SEN, primarily to ensure that we deliver for the children and families who need and rely on those services, but also to ensure that the large sums of money being spent on those services are financing an effective system that prioritises early intervention, not the expensive late interventions that so often categorise our system in education. We all agree that the financial position we face is extremely difficult. In this context, I will continue to advocate for a properly funded education system where we are ambitious about real transformation to deliver fit-for-purpose education for our children and young people, where the barriers of division are broken down and where all learners, regardless of their level of additional need or socio-economic background, can reach their full potential.

12.00 noon

Mr McGuigan: I speak in the debate as a Sinn Féin member of the Economy Committee, and my comments will hopefully be brief. It is important at the beginning of my remarks, however, to state clearly, as others have, that the Executive have been and continue to be substantially underfunded by the British Tory Government. That Tory austerity policy continues to have a detrimental impact on the Executive's finances, our public services, our economy and, ultimately, our workers and families. I do not think that that is up for debate, as it was agreed and made clear in the letter that was sent to the British Government in the first weeks after the resumption of the institutions. We are also in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, with, in many instances, families struggling to make ends meet and businesses struggling with increased costs. Those are the constraints on the Executive and the Ministers in it.

Speaking in my role as a member of the Economy Committee, I welcome the Minister for the Economy's work in his first few weeks in office, setting out the direction that he intends to take in his Department: to grow economic activity in the North; to promote regional balance; to create good jobs to benefit our citizens and to undo some of the damage from austerity; to use the advantage that dual market access offers us in promoting the North as a place in which to invest; and to grow the all-island economy for the benefit of everyone.

When we talk about that work in the context of budgets and Estimates, I have to point out that, over and above the impact of austerity and funding shortfalls, the loss of EU funding as a result of Brexit will particularly hit the Department for the Economy, especially its skills programmes, apprenticeships and business support programmes. The European social fund (ESF) and the European regional development fund (ERDF) were integral to skills provision. The 10X skills strategy identified concerns about the effect that ending the European social fund would have on skills provision. The British Government's Shared Prosperity Fund falls short, leaving the Executive £90 million short of the £195 million that we received when we were in the EU. British Government schemes such as the Shared Prosperity Fund and the Community Renewal Fund gave the Executive little, if any, scope to shape skills funding to the needs of businesses and workers here.

We in the North are often left to deal with the consequences of insufficient funding, bad decisions or inaction at Westminster. Despite that, our Ministers are making meaningful interventions and working to support workers, businesses and families. I commend the Finance Minister for doing just that in a positive way on a number of occasions in her first few weeks in office. It is clear to all of us that the best people to take decisions on behalf of the people living on this island are politicians elected on this island. We need the power, including fiscal power, and the sovereignty to do so.

Ms Forsythe: Members are aware that today's debate is a largely technical exercise to keep our Departments running. The spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account both relate to the 2023-24 Budget. The Estimates are retrospective, and the Vote on Account allows Departments to continue to deliver services as they did in 2023-24 into the early months of the 2024-25 financial year. That does not constitute the setting of a 2024-25 Budget. This is not the way in which we want to

debate Supply resolutions: we want clarity, fair funding and appropriate time for scrutiny. In this instance, the lack of certainty about how much funding was available to Northern Ireland played a key part in the delays.

There has been a long-term injustice in the funding of public services in Northern Ireland. We have inevitably fallen behind. Our funding model has not been sufficient. I thank our DUP interim leader, Gavin Robinson MP, for leading on that at Westminster and our DUP peers, particularly Lord Morrow, for securing debates in the House of Lords last year on funding injustice in Northern Ireland and for the real pressure that they have applied on that subject. That continued pressure contributed to the UK Government's recognition that Northern Ireland's funding model needed attention. The package offered in February, however, has failed to address the situation appropriately. It includes allowance to write off prior year overspends of over £500 million yet acknowledges that we were underfunded by more than that amount in previous years, and it then changes how that will be assessed from 2024-25 going forward. Under that logic, Northern Ireland was not overspent in 2023-24; it was underfunded, and the £500 million deemed to be funding to cover that write-off should have been an additional £500 million for that year. That would have gone a long way towards addressing the pay awards that have not yet been covered by the Supply resolutions, such as those — mentioned by a number of Members — for non-teaching staff in schools. They deserve fair pay. Northern Ireland deserves the fair funding to cover that, and I urge the Finance Minister to continue to make that argument in her ongoing discussions with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. We missed out on funding in 2023-24, and it should be made available to us from 2024-25 onwards to settle all public-sector pay awards.

I also urge the Finance Minister to continue to fight for an adequate fair funding model for Northern Ireland for 2024-25 and beyond to enable the Executive and the Assembly to be in a position to debate a meaningful Budget and multi-year Budgets, going forward.

Northern Ireland's funding should never have been allowed to fall below need, and, once again, I raise in the Chamber that the UK Government cannot adopt a UK needs formula and agree to intervene to protect one part of the UK to ensure that its funding does not fall below need while not doing so for another part of the UK, allowing it not only to fall to need but plunge well below it. Yet that is what happened in Northern Ireland. In order for Northern Ireland

to be treated fairly, the UK Government need to increase, fully baselined, Northern Ireland's funding per head by proportionately the same amount above need as was the case in Wales from 2018-19, in which the uplift was applied, and, from that point, the uplift should be applied to Northern Ireland with the provision of a fiscal floor at the level of need rather than the fiscal ceiling. That is the only fair way forward.

We support the motions out of the necessity of the circumstances. The 2023-24 resolution is retrospective on money already spent. However, I call on the Finance Minister to commit to continuing to fight for a better financial outcome for the 2024-25 Budget Bill in the months ahead, for Northern Ireland public finances to be placed on a sustainable footing and for the Executive to secure the resources that they need to deliver effective public services. We need that to deliver for Northern Ireland and to deliver on our key objectives, such as supporting and boosting our National Health Service; growing our economy; creating jobs; tackling the cost-of-living crisis; securing a better education system; and improving childcare to ensure that no mother or father in Northern Ireland has to choose between caring for their children or going to work. We need fair funding and clarity on Northern Ireland finances moving forward as a matter of urgent priority, and we need a 2024-25 Budget as soon as possible.

Mr Nesbitt: Like many Members who have spoken, I am somewhat frustrated at, shall we say, the suboptimal manner in which we are dealing with this business. I imagine that the Minister is also frustrated by that. Multi-year Budgets are a sensible and desirable idea. It is inevitable that those Budgets will come, and not before time.

Part of my frustration is at the way we do business, and I want to use the next couple of minutes to make a plea for thinking about doing it differently, but, before that, I will turn to money already spent. As party spokesperson on the economy, I was on the Economy Committee when the Minister chaired that Committee. We scrutinised the energy strategy. In December 2021, the Department published 'The Path to Net Zero Energy', which, I think we will all agree, is a keynote document on climate change and the need to get to net zero. On page 26, there is a table estimating capital investment and savings. I am sure that departmental officials will say that those are indicative figures, but they are interesting because, in terms of additional capital investment, the table says that the investment will be £1.2 billion per annum starting in 2021

with net savings of £301 million. There is no evidence whatever that those funds were allocated. Of course, not all of that investment would have been public money, but a significant amount would have been, and I can find no indication that I can find that additional funds were made available to meet that £1.2 billion annual investment.

On the Estimates, it seems to me that we are saying, "Let's look at what we've done before and give Departments 65% of that annual figure". I am not sure that that is at all the way to go. Recently, in Committee, we were talking to the Department, and I asked about five of its arm's-length bodies or non-departmental public bodies: Tourism Northern Ireland, Tourism Ireland, Invest Northern Ireland, InterTradeIreland and Northern Ireland Screen. The question was, "What is the return on the investment?"; in other words, "For every pound of public money that we put into those bodies, how much do they generate in return?". Surprisingly, the Department's officials were not able to answer that question. I believe that they are still working on it, but I was surprised that they were not able to say in any detail what the return on investment was. However, they were all certain that Northern Ireland Screen would come out on top. Of course, that makes me think that return on investment is not just about the finances. What about the impact that Northern Ireland Screen has on promoting a positive global image of Northern Ireland? It is more complex than a straight financial transaction, but, if we are concerned about value for money, surely we need to know the financial return on investment from those five bodies.

The other frustration for me is that in May 2016 — nearly eight years ago — we agreed that our Programme for Government would be an OBA — outcomes-based accountability — Programme for Government and that cross-cutting measures would be at its heart. For example, when it comes to educational underachievement, we would no longer point the finger simply at the Minister of Education and say, "That's your problem", because we understand that healthier children do better at school, so the Minister of Health has a role to play with the Minister of Education. We also understand that children in better housing are likely to do better at school, so, suddenly, the Minister for Communities has a role to play. There is then the question of transport, so the Minister for Infrastructure is at the table, as is the AERA Minister, who has responsibility for rural affairs. Tackling educational underachievement is therefore an all-Executive issue, and it needs budget. However, if we look

at these Estimates, we see that they are divided up, Department by Department. We know that, when money is tight, Ministers will look at everything that they do that costs money and divide it into two columns: statutory responsibilities and non-statutory responsibilities. If you are in the latter, God help you, because you are more than likely to be cut. That will affect cross-cutting and outcomes-based accountability government, which will affect how we deliver for our people.

Another issue — I say this as an outgoing member of the Policing Board — is that the police are now looking at the number of events that they attend that are health incidents and not crime incidents. I think that they are also looking at the number of hours that police officers spend in corridors outside emergency departments, waiting to hand over patients, particularly mental health patients, and sign them off to the hospital. That is a cross-cutting thing. The old saying is, "Police officers' response vehicles carry defibrillators; ambulance crews do not carry handcuffs". The police tend to be the responders of first and last resort. It may be that that is the best way to keep people safe. We have to have that debate, and, if the answer is, "Yes, the police are the best-placed service", the second question is, "Is that reflected in the Budget?". Currently, the answer to that is, "Absolutely not". If the police are going to do health duties, we have to have a debate about how the money is divided.

Those cross-cutting things are really important. Unless they are embedded in the Budget, as well as in the Programme for Government, I suspect that we will not deliver as we want to for our people. I know that that is for another day, but we need to have a fundamental review of how we do budgets and align them on a multi-year basis to Programmes for Government.

12.15 pm

Miss Hargey: I support today's resolutions. As was said, this is not the normal process by which these resolutions come forward. We know the reasons why, and, since she came into post, the Finance Minister has been clear on that. The spring Supplementary Estimates give effect to the allocations that were announced when the Assembly returned, and a key element of that was our public-sector pay. Many of us stood on the picket lines with public-sector workers in the lead-up to the Assembly's return. We know that that was a critical element of the Budget that was coming forward. I am glad that, in the Estimates, the Finance Minister has given an additional £100 million to public-

sector pay. I am hopeful that a resolution can be reached in each of the Departments as soon as possible. It is important that, here today and in backing these resolutions, we reinforce our support for fair pay for our public-sector workers.

Many in the Chamber have said that part of the reason that we are here today is because the British Government have admitted to underfunding the North for many years. We know that that underfunding over the past few years and, indeed, over the past decade or more has caused deep and lasting damage to our public services. Let us remember that a big part of that was a British Government policy of austerity to rob our public services, which impacted on the most vulnerable in our communities. It was that policy of choice by the British Government that has crippled our public services.

Last year, the Tories continued to impose cuts on our public services. Many of those cuts affected front-line services, as we heard from many contributors today, in Health, Education, Communities and our Justice Department. Those cuts are felt hardest by our most vulnerable people. We have seen and heard about that from the voluntary and community sector, which is often the low-hanging fruit that is cut first. That should be an alarm for all of us.

It is unacceptable that the British Secretary of State chose to inflict so much hardship on the most vulnerable. I am glad that the first act of the restored Assembly was a united call from all parties in the Chamber for a new fiscal framework that would ensure that we were provided funding on the basis of need. Sinn Féin is ready and willing, through our four-party Executive and working with the Opposition and others in the Chamber, to push the British Government to address underfunding in the North and its implications. That should remain our clear focus today and, importantly, in the coming weeks and months. We urgently need to address that underfunding. Of course, we need to look at the redesign and prioritisation of policies, resources and services, but we also need to look at the fiscal levers and the framework in its entirety.

I believe that a fundamental pillar of all that has to be targeting social need and effectively addressing poverty and inequality. Our families, communities and workers deserve nothing less.

Ms Bradshaw (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I will speak on behalf of the Committee for the Executive Office, and I will be fairly brief, as the

Executive Office has a relatively small budget compared with those of other Departments. However, it is an important budget, as the Department deals with some of the most sensitive, contentious and wide-ranging matters that we have to contend with.

To give an overview, the Department has been allocated around £185 million resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) and £12 million capital DEL for the financial year. The Department required around £15 million less resource DEL, but that was balanced by an additional requirement for £14 million in capital, which left a balance of a reduced DEL requirement of £1 million.

Payments to victims and survivors of the conflict accounted for £14 million of the money that was not required in 2023-24. Either the £59 million that was allocated to those payments was a considerable overestimate, or there was a significantly lower number of people who did not access the support that they needed. Certainly, the evidence from my discussions with the victims' sector tends, worryingly, to suggest the latter. Likewise, £5 million of the £32 million that was allocated to the victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse has not been spent. I have already carried out some meetings on that issue, and the Committee will be hearing from stakeholders in that area at this week's meeting. We will be enquiring about access to support and other matters. I am sure that Members would be extremely concerned if people who have suffered due to the conflict or because of childhood abuse were still, in 2024, facing barriers to receiving the recompense to which they are entitled or if they were simply not aware that they could submit a claim. I have to emphasise that that very much appears to be the case.

This has financial relevance, specifically because the easements in relation to payments for victims and survivors of the conflict and historical institutional abuse were included in the Department's first-day brief to the First Minister and deputy First Minister but the increased requirement for capital DEL was not. Most of that has been allocated to the Strategic Investment Board, and it is unclear as yet how that amount of expenditure was unforeseen.

Moving on to the Vote on Account at 65% of the £169 million resource and £26 million capital DEL from the previous financial year, the Department is to receive £127 million for those areas in the coming year, pending a formal Budget being agreed. It is acknowledged that this year is exceptional and that Budget processes are unusual, but the Committee

looks forward to being fully informed about money that the Department is going to spend. Not least of that expenditure is the creation of four new bodies: the office of identity and cultural expression; the Irish language commissioner; the commissioner for Ulster Scots and the Ulster-British tradition; and the climate change commissioner. All those bodies need to be adequately resourced to do the jobs that they are intended to do. At the same time, the existing arm's-length bodies of the Department need to be able to fulfil their roles. The 10% cut across the board in the previous financial year, which, in many cases, was just the latest of many such cuts carried out in succession, has left organisations understaffed and facing considerable difficulties in carrying out their functions. The Committee will wish now properly and fully to examine how the Department spends its money and the adequacy of sums allocated to it.

I will make a few brief remarks in my capacity as an Alliance Party MLA. Although we have heard that the recruitment process has begun, it is a matter of considerable concern that the Executive Office continues to operate without a permanent secretary and that some bodies associated with it are also operating without key personnel. For example, we have no Victims' Commissioner and no interim advocate for victims and survivors of mother-and-baby homes. Those should already have been acted upon, not least because we want to determine clearly what money is being spent by whom, for what purpose and with what controls.

On top of that, as I have mentioned, we have new bodies due to be set up but, as yet, no clear commitment from the First Minister and deputy First Minister as to exactly when. My concern is that those may be being deliberately delayed. When will those appointments be made? On top of that, we have some areas where additional expenditure may come to be required and, therefore, managed. For example, we still have no clarity of when and how much the institutions responsible for historical childhood abuse will in fact be contributing to redress as they are required to do. Time is of the essence, and we have to face the fact that legal action in that area may be required to be taken by the Executive Office and urgently.

Conversely, we also need to see the Executive Office leading on the shared future strategic framework, as per yesterday's motion. We should see more efficient action across a range of policy areas, including but not limited to reducing the costs of division. There is little point in arguing that we must have funding

allocated on the basis of need only then to throw away hundreds of millions of pounds every year on maintaining segregated services. There is a lot of work to be done, and I would like to see more action that reflects the urgency with which we have to do it.

Ms Bunting (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I declare that I have an immediate family member who works in the legal profession.

When I spoke in the Budget Bill debate in February, I noted that the Committee had not had the opportunity to consider the budget for the Department of Justice in any detail. I did, however, take the opportunity to reflect some of the concerns raised during the Committee's initial oral evidence session with the then permanent secretary. Since that time, the Committee has heard from various directorates in the Department and from a number of key justice organisations, and issues around the Department's financial position have been a recurring theme. It is safe to say that those discussions have done nothing to ease the Committee's early concerns.

With regard to the 2023-24 financial year, as I mentioned in February, the vast majority of the Department's resource budget — around 95%, I believe — is taken up by the PSNI, the Prison Service, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service and legal aid. There is very little scope to reduce spend without impacting on the delivery of vital services. Indeed, we are seeing the outworkings of some of that already.

Over the past year, the Department reduced its projected overspend from £149 million to £35 million. That was achieved by slowing spend across the sector and included, for example, suspending PSNI recruitment and not increasing the number of prison officers. Serious measures such as those come with serious consequences. The stagnant number of prison officers comes when the prison population is almost at its highest ever and is still increasing. That will inevitably impact on the ability to provide effective rehabilitation. Moreover, we are also approaching the lowest number of police officers since the formation of the PSNI, which is contrary to the New Decade, New Approach political agreement to grow the number of officers in the force to 7,500.

Members have also heard from the Bar Council and the Law Society that slowing down the payment of legal aid fees as a budget management tool has forced professionals to leave the Bar or shift away from legal aid work. They advised that that has disproportionately

affected younger professionals and women and could threaten access to justice for many across Northern Ireland.

Those are just a few of the issues raised with the Committee, but concerns were also expressed by others, such as the Lady Chief Justice and the Probation Board, about the impact of funding constraints on the delivery of their services. All these matters are likely to affect us all, directly or indirectly, and will certainly impact on wider society.

Turning to the next financial year, the Committee considered the DOJ's response to the Department of Finance on its resource and capital requirements for 2024-25 at its meeting on 14 March. The Department of Justice indicated that a flat-cash budget settlement would mean that it would go into the new financial year with inescapable pressures of £444 million, which equates to 39% of its baseline. Given that a significant proportion of the Department's budget relates to staff and other fixed costs, and that the only flexibility remaining is around 5%, it is difficult to see what further measures it could take in that scenario to live within budget. The scope to manage budgetary pressures is extremely constrained, and members are concerned that important services may need to be cut, or indeed further cut, in order for the Department even to hope to live within its budget.

Having reflected on what we have heard to date, the Committee agreed to write to our home Department and the Minister of Finance to outline members' concerns. In particular, the Committee drew attention to the fact that people often enter the justice system when their needs are not being more appropriately met by other parts of the public sector, such as the health service, due to demand there. Greater collaborative working may help to address some of those issues in a more appropriate and cost-effective manner. Moves towards policy- or needs-based budgeting could also be beneficial in that regard.

Members believe that multi-year Budgets would help to provide a degree of stability, not only for Departments and their bodies but for the community and voluntary sector, which often delivers vital services for the justice arena. Members also raised the work undertaken by the Fiscal Council on the estimate of relative need for public spending in Northern Ireland, including the requirement for it to include additional security and justice costs that do not occur in Scotland, England or Wales. The Committee wishes to ensure that the case for additional funding to meet those unique

requirements is being made to His Majesty's Treasury.

That is just a quick summary of the concerns raised during our initial briefings from the Department and key justice partners. The Committee expects full engagement with the Department on its budget and expenditure plans, particularly given the stark picture that has been painted in the evidence that we have received thus far.

I laid out my views and my party political position clearly during the previous Budget Bill debate. They are on the record for all to see and still hold true, so I will not take up the House's time by repeating them.

12.30 pm

Mr McGrath: I support the remarks that numerous Members so far have made about this not being a perfect process — it is far from perfect — in that we are looking at agreeing money that has already been spent. However, given that a significant amount of money is allocated to Departments and that we often just apply flat-cash budgets from one year to the next, in reflecting on last year's budgetary process, which we did not have much involvement in, and looking forward to next year's, I will, as our party's health spokesperson, highlight some of the essential issues that prevail in the health service in the hope that some of that information will trickle down and that we see some help for that sector's budget in the year ahead.

Many of the issues that our health service faces stem from chronic underfunding and from the fact that Ministers work with a silo mentality, as other Members have said. Poor mental health is one of the most important issues that we face. It costs the taxpayer £3.4 billion every year. If we were to put a small amount of investment through our health service and other Departments to address the issues, we could save money in the long run and, most importantly, help people where they need it. I am a bit concerned that, although we have had the publication of the mental health strategy, there is no proper financial structure to go alongside it. There is not much point in having aspirations if we are not helping people. I would like to see that addressed.

We know that waiting lists are far too long. People are being left to languish on them for far too long. It will cost approximately £135 million a year to help clear those waiting lists, so I hope that, as we regularise the financial

approaches for this year, we will see, as we look towards next year, some targeted finance to help the people on those waiting lists. Those people are needlessly suffering pain daily, but we can help them if we make interventions good and early.

Primary care faces major challenges, yet, even with those challenges, the Department of Health announced last week that it will withdraw indemnity cover for GP work that is done out of hours. We are the only area of the UK that does not support doctors by giving them cover for indemnity. The only sector here that was lucky enough to receive it was GPs providing out-of-hours services, but that is now being withdrawn. That cost is to be borne directly by GPs. It makes the sector unattractive to them to work in because they have to pay to go to work. That does not have to be done in any other sector or in any other place on these islands. We need to regularise that quickly. We need to make primary care and GP work attractive so that doctors will want to go into it.

The 10-year cancer strategy also needs a funding plan. We were told at the outset that £778 million would be required over 10 years. I am not sure that too much of that has been applied. Just last night, colleagues of mine on Newry, Mourne and Down District Council supported a Sinn Féin motion but tabled an amendment to it. While we support the strategy, my SDLP colleagues asked whether it needed to be funded. I am sure that the Finance Minister will receive a letter from that council asking for the continuation of the cancer strategy with a financial plan alongside it. I am pleased that the amendment achieved consensus among all parties.

There is money in the spending plan for the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO). That essential office carries out its duties with full independence and impartiality. It is becoming apparent, however, that it is struggling to conclude its work fully and in a timely manner. Sometimes, representatives are left for many years waiting for investigations to be completed. A lack of finance can be at the centre of that. It is also carrying an increasing workload. Just a few months ago, an SDLP motion at Newry, Mourne and Down District Council called for an increase in the budget for NIPSO, and, again, it received full cross-party support. We welcome that support from all parties there.

As a constituency MLA, I find that the issues that are presented to my office and, I am sure, to those of other MLAs extend beyond health and the lack of funding. The roads have never

been as bad. They are absolutely dreadful. Driving is a really dangerous activity now because of the state of them. There is not enough housing to go round all our constituents. Councils do not have enough money to do their duties. Schools are under-resourced, and I have listed the health issues. The list could go on and on. There is a critical need to have a Programme for Government, yet the response from this place is silence due to the collapse for a number of years or, when I asked the First Minister yesterday about publishing a Programme for Government, I was told, "Let's not be in a hurry".

The public are in a hurry. They are in a hurry to get their loved ones off waiting lists. They are in a hurry to get childcare sorted so that they do not have to fork out more than £10,000 per year. They are in a hurry to get their children's school into proper order. The public are in a hurry. The community and voluntary sector is in a hurry. Healthcare staff are in a hurry, and the Opposition are in a hurry. I hope that the Finance Minister will also be in a hurry to deliver the money to where it is needed so that we can help our communities now.

Ms Kimmins (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate as Chair of the Health Committee. The health budget makes up just over 50% of the block grant and has significant implications for the health and well-being of the people of the North. It is crucial that we understand its impact and significance.

First, let us acknowledge the importance of healthcare in any society. It is the cornerstone of a thriving and prosperous community. The allocation of funds within the Department of Health's budget directly affects the quality and accessibility of the healthcare services available to the citizens in our constituencies. We must therefore ensure that those funds are allocated wisely and efficiently.

We are all too aware of the financial pressures facing the Department of Health and the trusts. The Department has indicated that it has an estimated overspend of over £500 million in 2023-24. The trusts have indicated that they all have a deficit of at least £50 million, and the Department has indicated that it would take more than £1 billion to address waiting lists. Those are considerable pressures.

The Committee has heard, in its first set of meetings, about the pressures and stress on the healthcare system. Unfortunately, it is our dedicated and hard-working healthcare staff

who are at the end of those financial pressures. I pay tribute to all healthcare staff, who go above and beyond to care for and treat some of the most vulnerable in our society. Those are people in our families and communities. The Committee welcomes the additional funding identified for outstanding pay rises and urges the Minister to continue to meet representative bodies and ensure that pay rises are implemented as soon as possible.

I welcome the ongoing and positive engagement that there has been with the Minister to date and with departmental officials since the Committee started to meet. Whilst some of the information that the Committee received has, to be honest, been frightening, we appreciate the work that is undertaken to address the failings in the system. The Committee understands the difficult decisions that the Minister and the Department will have to take over the coming period to address many difficult and pressing issues, including waiting lists, recruitment, workforce retention and pay. We must recognise that healthcare requires collaboration, innovation and a commitment to prioritising the well-being of all citizens. While the Budget provides a framework for action, it is up to all of us — politicians, policymakers, healthcare professionals, community leaders and citizens — to work together to ensure its effective implementation and to build healthier communities for generations to come. The Committee will look to work collaboratively with the Minister, health professionals and key stakeholders. It will seek to advocate for equitable access to healthcare services, support initiatives that promote health and well-being and hold the Department accountable for the prudent use of resources allocated in the Department of Health budget. My hope is that, despite the pressures in the system, we can work together to begin a journey to create a brighter and healthier future for all.

I will now make some remarks as Sinn Féin health spokesperson. Our Health and Social Care workers have waited far too long for a fair pay rise, and we need to ensure that that can be implemented at the earliest possible stage. Our health service is on its knees, not least as a result of over a decade of Tory austerity, including cuts of £1 billion imposed by the Tories last year. It is the most vulnerable in our society who feel those cuts most acutely. I commend my colleague the Finance Minister for her diligence in working in these challenging financial circumstances and for ensuring that a fair pay rise for Health and Social Care workers has been prioritised at the earliest possible stage.

It is important to emphasise that it is the responsibility of the relevant Ministers, not the Finance Minister, to make bids and determine how budget allocations are spent. Health is undoubtedly a priority for us all, and the allocation of over 50% of the overall Budget signifies that. However, we also have to be realistic, and every Member in the Chamber knows that the total block grant falls well short of what is needed to stabilise our health service. Until it is stabilised, it is almost impossible to fully realise the significant investment and transformation that every corner of our health and social care system needs.

Some of the most basic services that the public rightly expect to have access to are in crisis, with astronomical waiting lists that continue to grow; GP services collapsing; community pharmacy and dentistry on their knees; and funding cuts to vital services such as the Children's Hospice. Those are all strong indicators of the compelling need for our public services to be properly funded. It is untenable that we are expected to continue to deliver public services with the scraps from the Tories' table. When the Assembly was restored two months ago, all parties were united in our call for the British Government to provide funding on the basis of need. Sinn Féin will continue to work to achieve that, and I urge all other parties to join us in continuing to press the British Government so that we can deliver, collectively, the quality of healthcare that all of our constituents need and deserve.

Mr Kingston: Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, I wish to speak as a member of the Communities Committee, but perhaps it is inappropriate for me to speak before the Chairperson, if he has not spoken yet.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: It is up to you.

Mr Kingston: I will carry on and speak as a member of the Communities Committee. I recognise that this is a largely procedural debate regarding the finances in the last financial quarter, but it provides an opportunity to make some important points and highlight needs. During my time on the Committee, we have been receiving briefings, catching up on matters and hearing regularly about the consequences of an inadequate departmental budget and the financial pressures that have resulted from that. For example, as many Members are aware, staff employed in neighbourhood renewal partnerships did not hear until 27 March whether their funding would continue into the new financial year. That was,

literally, with a few days to go until the new financial year. They have now been given a three-month contract and await a full departmental budget being set. They did not know that until there were only a few days to go, and they have only a three-month contract. They were told that they would get a two-year contract in the last financial year but the second year of that was to be confirmed, so it was not really a two-year budget at all. Also, I am advised that there was no pay increase last year. For the two previous years, the increase was just 2%, so it did not keep up with inflation, and for the 11 years before that there was no increase at all. I am hearing concerns that some staff may be being paid below the minimum wage based on their actual working hours.

Those are staff who are working in many of our most disadvantaged communities. They are trying to promote neighbourhood regeneration, deliver community services, promote community development and capacity building and run advice services. There is concern that those neighbourhood renewal partnerships are losing staff. The situation is demoralising: people are looking to other sectors where they can get paid and have more job security. That is a need that we will continue to highlight on the Committee and with the Minister.

12.45 pm

It is widely recognised that the rate of new social housing completion is not keeping pace with housing need. The Department has committed to building around 1,500 new social houses this year, but, at the same time, the Housing Executive's stock is declining by around 500 properties each year due to the right-to-buy scheme. The Housing Executive's stock is now around 83,000. It was once much greater than that — it was once close to double that number. We also know that reliance on temporary accommodation continues to grow year-on-year. It greatly increased during COVID, and it has not declined since. That is another key need that must be addressed.

We also heard about the number of vacancies that are in the Department. A number of issues have contributed to that, but, certainly, finance is one that has resulted in the high level of vacancies, particularly in public-facing services. We have been told, however, that progress is now being made. We will continue to highlight the financial needs of the Department in responding to those societal needs, particularly for services that support low-income households.

The DUP is leading the charge at Westminster for a funding package for Northern Ireland that will be based on the recognised level of need here in the same way that such a package was provided for Wales. Our interim party leader, Gavin Robinson, has been spearheading that campaign, and we will be unrelenting in demanding a needs-based Budget for Northern Ireland.

Mr Honeyford: As the Alliance Party spokesperson on the economy, I will raise a couple of things that are not only important now but essential for future years. I will mention a couple of stats. Innovation levels among Northern Ireland businesses are the lowest across these islands. In the UK, we are twelfth out of 12 regions. Other stats indicate that, unfortunately, we are not seeing the growth in higher and further education enrolment that our economy needs. While it is welcome that we are seeing a little growth in apprenticeships, figures from 2020-22 are likely to be skewed by COVID.

Our economy has not been a net contributor to the UK Treasury since the 1930s but has been in deficit annually since the 1960s, so it is heavily reliant on the public sector. That is completely unsustainable, and the resulting squeeze has been brought into sharp focus by the UK Treasury's below-need funding of Northern Ireland's spending. We cannot afford to view the economy any longer as a side issue. Our economy is central to creating the future that we all want. Our economic success is also central to funding, reforming and improving our public services.

I want to focus on growth, opportunities and some challenges. I have said this before, and I will keep repeating it: we should not lose sight of the fact that it is our business community that creates employment and apprenticeships and brings money into our economy to grow our GDP. It is essential that we work in here to create the conditions for business and that we work in partnership to provide the skilled and trained workforce to give our business community in every sector the best platform so that they can grow.

Alliance absolutely supports the unique position of access to both the GB and EU trade markets. I have said before that it is one thing for us to understand that opportunity but another for the world market to know about it. It is another thing to invest in what is required to exploit the opportunity. That will cost money, and it will not happen without vision and investment. It needs to be set alongside supporting and encouraging our indigenous businesses to realise the

potential that that market access can bring for them, including encouraging greater collaboration, partnership and economic trade across this island as well as the rest of the EU. Significant investment is needed to realise growth, but, when we look at the figures, we see that the Department's resource DEL was about £130 million lower in 2022-23 compared with the three-year draft Budget that the Department of Finance prepared in 2022.

There were significant challenges for our economy last year, and those continue into this year: the loss of £30 million in EU funding for programmes; the energy transition, which urgently needs investment if we are to reach net zero targets; the reform of Invest NI and funding for a new direction, which needs prioritisation; and the need for adequate funding of higher and further education, skills and all-age apprenticeships.

I welcome the pay award for teachers in our schools, but our FE college lecturers need to see an agreeable pay award that rewards and values them fully. The Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Finance need to deliver for our lecturers as soon as possible. It cannot be left to the side. If we are to build a skilled workforce, we need the best qualified experts to teach and train the next generation in our colleges. Our further education colleges can no longer be viewed and valued as second class or the back-up option. That starts with how we pay and treat our staff and lecturers. Developing FE colleges into technical universities is something that I will continue to raise. As a minimum, the reform of FE needs to be adequately funded. We cannot continually ask for more but pay and invest less.

It is really important that, moving forward, the Department for the Economy has an adequate budget allocation that enables it to make all those reforms and pay staff appropriately. We cannot afford to miss the opportunity that we have for a short time. We have a window of opportunity to transform and grow our economy. It is important to stress that the growth of our economy is not a single-Department issue. That growth includes not only DAERA but the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for Communities.

My colleague Eóin Tennyson already made the point about reform. The Alliance Party looks forward with hope and to seeing better. Now is the time to draw the line and to end the cycle of collapse so that we can build the economy, see financial growth and create new jobs and the opportunities that all our people deserve.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I will speak on this motion as Chair of the Communities Committee. I also intend to make some brief remarks in my role as the Sinn Féin spokesperson on communities.

Since the debate on the accelerated passage of the Budget Bill and the Vote on Account in February, the Committee for Communities requested and received a number of briefings from officials, including the permanent secretary and all the deputy secretaries in the Department. Those briefings focused on the challenges and pressures of the continued provision of services and support by the Department for Communities. Without exception, each briefing recounted the difficulty that the Department will have to continue to provide services to more people with higher levels of need in what is a very serious cost-of-living crisis within the limits of a budgetary envelope that cannot be reasonably stretched to meet that need. At each briefing, we discussed the budgetary challenges associated with, to name but a few, welfare mitigations; housing benefit; rates; the building of more affordable homes; and the provision of support, advice and relief to some of the most vulnerable in our communities, including the homeless.

The Committee heard consistently about the extent of the gap between what the Department can do or has ambition to do and the lack of available funds and staff to make that happen. Furthermore, we were advised of the extent of the significant resource pressures that the Department has forecast for this coming financial year. It has bid for more than £130 million from the Executive. Those bids do not all relate to funding for the action plans and strategies on which the Committee is seeking updates; they are non-ring-fenced resource bids. It is the money needed to keep paying social security benefit, as well as for the Job Start programme, the Supporting People initiative and universal credit.

The Committee was advised that, as the largest of the nine Departments in the Civil Service, the Department for Communities had a budget of £10 billion for 2023-24. The Committee wants to be able to undertake its statutory role properly and to really get into the detail of following that expenditure, ensuring that the right questions are asked and that every pound is spent in the most sensible way and, crucially, where it is most needed. The reality is that the Department for Communities was one of the Departments that would have run out of cash had there not been accelerated passage of the Budget Bill. The largest Department had

reached the stage where insufficient funds were available in February for the Department to continue functioning. The Committee wants to ensure that that does not happen again.

It is clear that the Department is facing a profound challenge to its ability to plan strategically. The fluidity and uncertainty of the financial landscape, exacerbated by the significant shortfall in moneys available to the Executive, will hinder its capacity to forge long-term plans that are not only feasible but ambitious. The unpredictability compromises both the Department and, therefore, the Committee's ability to anticipate and effectively respond to the evolving needs of our communities, thereby impacting the overall quality and reach of the services provided to our communities.

The exceptional circumstances of this year's Budget have necessitated rapid responses and adjustments, often at the expense of more thorough oversight and collaborative discourse. Whilst it is imperative to acknowledge the exceptional nature of the Budget cycle, it is also essential to acknowledge that the unprecedented challenges facing the Department are linked to broader societal and economic shifts and have been exacerbated by the now-acknowledged underfunding of public services here. As we move forward, a more collaborative approach to open dialogue and scrutiny needs to be implemented. The Committee for Communities wants to do what it can to better support the foundations of a more resilient and prosperous future for all our community.

In closing, as Committee Chair, there is no doubt about the challenges ahead for the Department and the Committee for Communities with this Vote on Account. Whilst I reiterate today that the Committee for Communities is interested in and committed to working collectively in its scrutiny and legislative role, the challenging and competing priorities facing the Department in the upcoming fiscal year will remain a substantial challenge for us all.

I will now make some brief remarks in my role as the Sinn Féin spokesperson for communities. What is clear, a chairde, [*Translation: friends*] is that the Budget imposed by the British Secretary of State last April falls far short of what is required to meet the needs of both the Department for Communities and the people it supports. I call, once again, for a commitment from the British Government to address the historical underfunding of this institution. While it is crucial that today's Supply

resolution is passed to ensure that the allocations announced in February can proceed, and, hopefully, bring a sense of certainty and stability to the Department going forward, as well as to our hard-pressed public-sector workers, we need to acknowledge that funding gaps remain, and that has to be addressed if we are to make progress on the issues that will make meaningful changes to people's lives in the time ahead, such as tackling the growing levels of poverty, supporting workers and families, delivering more social and affordable homes and protecting private renters. We must therefore, a chairde, speak with one voice and continue to robustly challenge the funding formula used to allocate the Budget in the North.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The debate will continue after Question Time with the Minister of Finance, and the next Member to be called will be Cathal Boylan. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance

Back in Business Rate Support Scheme

1. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Finance what assessment has been made of the impact of the back in business rate support scheme. (AQO 234/22-27)

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): When the back in business scheme was last in place, during 2022-23, 101 businesses, the majority of which were small, independent retailers, benefited from support in the form of a 50% rate reduction. That helped businesses to get started, supported jobs and got long-term vacant units back into use. Given the positive impact that the back in business scheme had, I am glad to advise that legislation will be made later this month to restore the scheme, and that will allow for debate at the Assembly. The Committee has cleared the relevant policy stage associated with the measure. Reinstating that popular scheme is more important now than ever before, as it will allow new businesses to emerge and will grow our tax base.

Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister for her answer. In the current climate, my supplementary question was going to be about whether the Minister has plans to reintroduce the scheme, so I will just say that it is good news to hear that that will happen later in the month. That will help small businesses.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for his support. It is an important scheme that provides for a 50% reduction in businesses' rates for up to two years if they move into premises that were previously used for retail purposes. The scheme has the ability to get some of the premises on our high streets back into use by businesses, giving those businesses space to get started up.

Miss Brogan: Will the Minister outline who is eligible for the back in business scheme?

Dr Archibald: As I said to Mr Harvey, businesses are eligible if they move into premises that were previously used for retail

purposes and have been unoccupied for 12 months or more. The previous Finance Minister amended the scheme in April 2021, extending the duration of support from 12 months to 24 months, thus helping give businesses additional certainty. That extension will be retained when the scheme is reintroduced.

Rate Relief: Review

2. **Mr Tennyson** asked the Minister of Finance whether she will commission an independent review of domestic and non-domestic rates relief. (AQO 235/22-27)

Dr Archibald: The rates system and rate reliefs were subject to public consultation, review, reform and revision in 2007, 2012, 2016, 2017, 2019 and, most recently, this year. A number of changes have been implemented as a result of the reviews. More frequent revaluations have been introduced, the back in business and rural ATM schemes have been reintroduced, and new legislation has been made to enable councils to strike different levels for household and business rates.

In addition, the Department previously availed itself of impartial advice garnered from the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC), including advice on the targeting of COVID-19 rate support and a comparative study of domestic rates against council tax. In the next few months, the UUEPC will undertake work on business rate poundage differentials across council areas.

I am open to ideas from any quarter about how to realign the existing generous suite of rate supports, including from Members of the Assembly and from the Fiscal Commission. I am not sure that an expensive external review would be the best use of the limited resources that are available to the Executive at this time. I want to use the findings of the most recent consultation to inform further work on how best to align the rates system with the Executive's strategic priorities. It is essential, as part of that process, to grow our tax base to moderate the overall tax burden.

Mr Tennyson: I thank the Minister for her response. She referred to the Department's business rates review consultation in 2019, in which a number of consultees said that they believe that a more holistic review of rate reliefs was needed, and to the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, which advises her Department and made a similar suggestion. To be clear, is the Minister saying that she disagrees with that view?

Dr Archibald: As I said, I plan to use the consultation responses that were recently submitted to the revenue-raising consultation to inform my analysis and to consider potential reform of the rating system. I welcome views from any quarter on that piece of work, which will inform how we move forward. It is important that we look at how we can best align what we are trying to achieve in our social and economic priorities with our rating system. That is something that I am keen to do.

Miss Hargey: Will the Minister detail any plans that she has to review the non-domestic rating system?

Dr Archibald: The system of business rates has, as I have said on a number of occasions, already been subject to public consultation, review and reform over the past couple of decades. I have advised my officials that I want to explore ideas about how we can best align rates support with the strategic priorities of the Executive and to grow the tax base, which is essential, as I have said, to moderating our overall tax burden.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, you said twice that you want to grow the tax base, but you also said that you do not want a fundamental review of the rating system. In simple terms, how should we grow the tax base and from where should we generate additional revenue?

Dr Archibald: It is important that, when looking at the rating system, we are also looking at the economic vision that the Economy Minister has outlined around supporting businesses to grow and to create jobs and get new businesses into premises and have them contribute to our rating system. That is what we want to be able to do by aligning our social and economic priorities with the limited powers that we have for raising revenue, which are mostly with the rating system.

Shared Prosperity Fund

3. **Mr Donnelly** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on discussions with HM Treasury on the status of funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund beyond March 2025. (AQO 236/22-27)

Dr Archibald: Unfortunately, the British Government's position on whether they will continue funding the Shared Prosperity Fund beyond March 2025 is not yet clear. I fully understand the anxiety of those in the voluntary and community sector who rely on this funding

to support the vital work that they do. My officials have been pressing their counterparts in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and the Treasury for clarity on this. I intend to raise this matter at ministerial level in the time ahead. I will also be stressing that DLUHC needs to learn the lessons from the delayed implementation of the Shared Prosperity Fund here when it was first established.

Mr Donnelly: I thank the Minister for her answer. There have been concerns about the way that the funding has been provided. For example, the money is released every three months in arrears, which creates instability for many organisations. What assurance can the Minister give that, beyond March 2025, the system in place will be more efficient and effective?

Dr Archibald: A number of lessons need to be learned from the roll-out of the Shared Prosperity Fund. The Member will be aware that we have also made the case in relation to the British Government delivering the fund centrally, rather than it coming through the Executive, and we are not able to align the funding that is delivered to our priorities in the Programme for Government and the things that the Executive want to achieve more broadly. All those lessons need to be learned, and we will make the case to the Treasury on how we move forward beyond March 2025.

Mr Delargy: Does the Minister agree that the Shared Prosperity Fund would be much more effective in addressing need if it were delivered directly by Departments here?

Dr Archibald: Yes is the short answer. The previous Finance Minister and the Executive argued that the replacement for EU funds should be delivered by local Departments and not from Whitehall. That would have enabled us to ensure that the funding was aligned with our priorities. Unfortunately, the British Government did not agree with that approach. However, my Department has worked closely with the Department for the Economy to secure funding from the Shared Prosperity Fund through commissions from DLUHC to DFE and its arm's-length bodies. Funding worth £17 million has been secured via that route. The commissioning approach has allowed funding to flow through established structures for the delivery of local interventions. Whilst not perfect, it is a welcome development and one that I hope can be built on for future funding.

Ms McLaughlin: The Women's Centre Derry and Derry Youth and Community Workshop have been victims of that flawed funding. Minister, what steps are you taking to ensure that we can undo the damage that has been done in our communities?

Dr Archibald: The Member will be aware that the Shared Prosperity Fund, as a replacement for EU funding, fell far short of what was delivered by EU funding through ESF and ERDF. The Shared Prosperity Fund in totality was £127 million over three years. The equivalent EU structural funds averaged £65 million per annum, so there is, obviously, a considerable shortfall. We also lost some funding that was repurposed as part of the financial package. It is important that we make the case for the EU structural funds to be fully restored relative to that amount and beyond it, because there is a seven-year commitment for EU funding, and we have only three years of the Shared Prosperity Fund. We need to continue to collectively make the case to the Treasury that the funding needs to be properly restored.

Mr Nesbitt: What percentage of the fund comes to Northern Ireland? Specifically, does that match the 3% of the population who reside here?

Dr Archibald: We made that case at the time. The Member will be aware that we did better in the drawdown of EU funds compared with, for example, the Barnett consequential that we get. I am not entirely sure what percentage we get, but I will ask officials to write to the Member about that.

Birth Certificates: Irish Translation

4. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Finance whether she will introduce legislation to allow for birth certificates, published before 11 March 2022, to be translated into Irish by the General Register Office. (AQO 237/22-27)

Dr Archibald: Work on the commitment in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document focused on how future registrations might be made in Irish. Providing retrospective certificates in Irish would require careful legal and technical consideration and appropriate resources. The Department will consider how best to address those questions alongside its other ambitions to progress the use of Irish in the registration services that it provides.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. The question was off the back of your response to a question for written answer, and I appreciate the extra information that you have given me today, but have we costed that work, and is there a timescale? Some of my constituents are very keen to see their birth certificates in Irish.

Dr Archibald: The Department continues to work on the roll-out of registrations in Irish. I recently met Conradh na Gaeilge to discuss our commitments in respect of the Irish language. Work is ongoing on how we can meet the commitments that we have made and on looking at some of the other issues.

Mr McGlone: San am i láthair, tá muid in áit iontach aisteach, ina dtig leat teastas breithe a fháil as Gaeilge, deimhniú báis a fháil as Gaeilge, ach ní thig leat uacht a dhéanamh as Gaeilge ach an oiread. *[Translation: At present, we are in the strange position in which one can have a birth certificate in Irish, as well as a death certificate in Irish, but we still cannot have a will conducted in Irish.]* What steps will be taken to provide that service?

Dr Archibald: The Department of Finance does not hold legislative authority for wills. I am engaging with my Executive colleagues to ensure that the New Decade, New Approach commitment is appropriately led and taken forward, and I have written to the Justice Minister to ask the Department of Justice, working with its agencies, such as the Courts and Tribunals Service, to take responsibility for progressing that issue, which relates to the repeal of the Administration of Justice Act and to the matter of wills and probate, which falls under its remit.

Mr Sheehan: How many registrations in Irish under the new legislation are re-registrations?

Dr Archibald: Since the option for births, marriages and deaths to be registered with a choice of Irish, bilingual or English certificate headings was introduced on 11 March 2022, there have been 4,934 bilingual and 92 Irish birth registrations; 1,164 bilingual and 25 Irish death registrations; and 1,382 bilingual and 17 Irish marriage or civil partnership registrations. Those figures include re-registrations. I expect that, as the changes to the system continue to bed in, they will increase over time.

Fujitsu: Public Procurement Contracts

5. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Finance for her assessment of awarding public procurement contracts to Fujitsu. (AQO 238/22-27)

Dr Archibald: As the Member will be aware from briefings at the Finance Committee, there are strict rules regarding the award of public contracts.

There are currently no grounds under the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 that would exclude Fujitsu from tendering for public contracts.

2.15 pm

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, you will be aware from the Horizon scandal that that company has destroyed people's lives across these islands and driven some to suicide. We have to ask serious questions about Fujitsu and companies like it. The scandal has been known about for many years. I suggest that your Department and officials need to take action. Fujitsu has £775 million of contracts in total. It has destroyed people's lives but has been handsomely paid by Departments. That is completely unacceptable.

Mr Speaker: I am not sure that there was a question there, but you might want to respond, Minister.

Dr Archibald: We are all appalled by the Horizon scandal and the impact that it has had on those who have been directly affected and their families. As I said in my original answer, the awarding of public contracts is bound in legislation as it stands and there are no grounds under the Public Contracts Regulations. Obviously, a public inquiry is ongoing, and we await its outcome.

Mr Kearney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. *[Translation: I thank the Minister]*

Minister, can you expand on the circumstances in which suppliers can be excluded from the awarding of government contracts and the extent to which public interest, public ethics and human rights influence that process, please?

Dr Archibald: A supplier may be excluded from tendering for government contracts only if it has committed an offence under the legislation listed in the Public Contracts Regulations. That legislation relates to offences committed mainly in regard to theft, bribery, fraud, organised crime, professional misconduct, labour market offences, tax offences or breaches of

competition law. At this stage, Fujitsu has not been found guilty of any of those crimes in relation to fraud or other crimes related to Horizon, and therefore there are no grounds, as it stands, for its exclusion from tendering for public contracts. Due to its ongoing involvement in the inquiry, Fujitsu has agreed to pause bidding for public contracts for new clients. On 18 January 2024, the local Fujitsu account manager provided some clarifications to the Department of Finance regarding Fujitsu's involvement in procurement here, and that position is likely to remain unchanged until the inquiry has reported. The inquiry is scheduled to conclude in September 2024, with a report to follow later in the year.

Ms Eastwood: When will the Minister bring forward a review of public procurement, following the publication of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report in April last year? I note that, in response to an Assembly question for written answer from me, you indicated that your Department was finalising the terms of reference: are we to believe that that is imminent?

Dr Archibald: In April 2023, the Audit Office published a report on its review of public procurement structures here. The report recognised the importance of public procurement as an enabling function for Departments to deliver essential public services and highlighted the need to ensure that procurement functions effectively in order to achieve value for money and align with broader Executive priorities. The report discussed the key role and responsibilities assigned to the Procurement Board under existing public procurement policy and concluded that a review of public procurement arrangements is necessary, including the role, responsibilities and position of the Procurement Board. I am considering the report and will bring my recommendations on the Procurement Board and a review of procurement governance to the Executive for consideration before summer recess.

Mr Elliott: I am just seeking clarification from the Minister on something that she said in answer to Mr Kearney, which was that Fujitsu will not be bidding for any further public contracts. Is that correct? Is that in Northern Ireland, and, if so, how long is that for?

Dr Archibald: My understanding of the current situation in relation to Fujitsu is that there will not be contracts with new customers. Where it already has contracts with an organisation or is involved in a bidding process, that will continue.

As I said, there are no grounds, at this stage, to exclude it from that process.

Mr Durkan: For clarity, there are no implications for existing contracts, should a company be found guilty of any or all of the offences listed by the Minister.

Dr Archibald: Obviously, there are legal issues in respect of the delivery of contracts. The position would be in respect of new contracts. I will write to the Member, outlining details on the specifics of the regulations on public procurement and contracts.

Revenue-raising Schemes: Executive Consideration

6. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Finance whether she has plans to bring revenue-raising schemes to the Executive for their consideration. (AQO 239/22-27)

Dr Archibald: The Executive recognise the need for fiscal sustainability and, as part of a new fiscal framework, will want to look at all options to deliver efficiencies, generate revenue, enhance borrowing powers and examine fiscal devolution. The main revenue-raising measure that falls within my Department's remit is the regional rate. The Executive recommended a 4% increase in the regional rate for 2024-25, which the Assembly passed on 12 March 2024 during the rates debate. That should be seen as a clear demonstration that the Executive recognise the need to deliver high-quality public services and ensure that our finances are on a more sustainable footing.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister. The Fiscal Council and the Fiscal Commission conducted detailed analysis and presented several outcomes. Has the Minister discarded those? If so, what does she plan to do to cover the growing fiscal gap?

Dr Archibald: The Secretary of State put forward a number of measures for consultation while the Executive were down. Departments will be in receipt of the responses to those in the next short while, and, certainly, I will consider the outworking of the consultation in respect of rates. As part of the consultation on the general finances for the North, we asked whether there were other revenue measures that could be considered. That is something that we will consider in the responses received.

Obviously, we do not want to be in a situation in which we put more regressive charges on the backs of workers and families who are already struggling with the cost of living. Our budgetary situation is a significant challenge. We will continue to make the case to the British Treasury and the British Government to be properly funded and to have a properly baselined funding framework on the basis of need. It has been recognised that we have been underfunded over the past number of years. Going forward, we need to be properly funded to deliver the high-quality public services that people deserve.

Mr Honeyford: When will the Minister bring her paper on fiscal devolution to the Executive?

Dr Archibald: We are working through the Budget process, at the minute, so there is a good bit on the Department's plate, but it is something that I want to bring to the Executive in the near future. As part of the negotiations that we will have with Treasury about a future fiscal framework, it is important that we have an agreed Executive position around the types of powers that we would be seeking. It is something that we will progress in the next short while.

Non-teaching Staff Pay Awards

8. **Ms Brownlee** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the approval of the business case for non-teaching staff pay awards. (AQO 241/22-27)

Dr Archibald: I recognise the vital role of non-teaching staff and the crucial contribution that they make to the education of our children and young people. My Department provided expenditure approval for the implementation of the non-teaching staff pay and grading review on 3 April 2024. It is now for the Department of Education to ensure the affordability of the measures before implementation.

Ms Brownlee: Will the Minister confirm whether the business case that has been approved will be provided for the meeting on 18 April for the unions?

Dr Archibald: I assume that that will be a matter for the Education Minister. My Department has approved the business case and the expenditure for the implementation of the pay and grading review. It will obviously be for the Education Minister to take that forward and to ensure that the implementation of the proposed measures is affordable.

Mr McGrath: Has the Minister had any meetings with the Minister of Health to try to secure additional funding for nursing staff, following the Royal College of Nursing's decision to turn down the Executive's pay offer?

Dr Archibald: I have been involved in bilateral meetings with all of my Executive colleagues as part of the budgetary process, and we have discussed the various challenges that face each of the Departments and their Ministers. It would not be appropriate for me to go into the individual bids at this point, because there is a process still to go through. I assure the Member that all Departments face significant pressures and challenges and we will have some difficult decisions to make in the weeks ahead in respect of the Budget.

Mr Baker: Why was there a delay in providing approval for the business case for non-teaching staff pay awards?

Dr Archibald: At every stage of the process, my officials worked at pace to complete the review of the information and reach a judgement on whether it was sufficient to enable expenditure approval. Unfortunately, the review identified at several stages that the information provided to my Department contained significant errors and was incomplete. I am sure that the Member will agree that decisions involving significant expenditure cannot be made on the basis of incorrect or inadequate information. Approval was provided as soon as the information was confirmed as being accurate and robust.

Gender Budgeting

9. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Finance to provide an update on gender budgeting within her Department. (AQO 242/22-27)

Dr Archibald: I am committed to ensuring that my Department follows best practice in relation to its section 75 duties, not only in considering the equality impacts of its own spending decisions but also in respect of the wider Budget process. The gender impact of Budget proposals should be captured as part of the equality impact assessment information requested from Departments as part of the Budget process and provided to the Executive to inform their decisions. However, I have asked my officials to consider what more can be done in relation to gender budgeting.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Following on from that response, what consideration, if any, can be

given to ensuring that the gender budgeting process can be improved?

Dr Archibald: As part of the Budget process for 2024-25, I have written to my Executive colleagues setting out the approach to our equality considerations. Going forward, I plan to engage fully with the Equality Commission on how we can improve equality considerations as part of that wider process. As I said, I want to fully consider how gender budgeting requirements can be better reflected. To that end, I will meet a number of the organisations that have expertise in respect of gender budgeting and that have carried out extensive research in that area.

The development of the Executive's social inclusion strategy, including the gender equality strategy, is another important step in improving consideration of gender in budgets. It will allow Departments to table Budget proposals in line with the priorities in those strategies. The work on the social inclusion strategy is being led by the Department for Communities and is an Executive priority.

Barnett Consequentials: Spring Budget

10. **Mr Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance to detail the Barnett consequential allocation that the Executive received in the 2024 spring Budget. (AQO 243/22-27)

Dr Archibald: The spring Budget announced by the Chancellor on 6 March 2024 provided £99.4 million of additional resource DEL Barnett consequentials for the Executive in 2024-25. That is based on the current Barnett formula, which will need to be updated to reflect the new 124% as part of the restoration package. I have sought and received assurances from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on that. I am also keen to see negotiations begin on the wider fiscal framework. That must include ensuring that the Executive receive an appropriate level of funding based on need.

Mr Kelly: Does the Minister believe that the Barnett consequentials must include the 24% needs-based factor?

Dr Archibald: The financial package that accompanied the Executive's restoration was clear that, from 2024-25, any uplift to the Executive's DEL budget through the Barnett formula would attract a 24% needs-based factor. Therefore, it has to be applied to the consequential received in the spring Budget. As

I said, I sought and have been given assurances by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that Treasury will work at pace with us over the coming weeks to agree the underlying methodology for the application of the formula. My officials have already begun engagement with Treasury officials on that.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: We now move on to topical questions.

Integrated Schools: Fresh Start Funding

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Finance, after declaring an interest as the parent of a child at one of the affected schools, to state which Minister — Finance or Education — is correct about who made the decision to remove funding from integrated schools, given that, having asked the Finance Minister and the Education Minister separate questions about the date on which they were informed that the UK Government had removed the ring fence from Fresh Start funding, the Education Minister said that he had been informed by the Finance Minister on 13 February that the ring fence had been removed, while the Finance Minister said that she informed the Education Minister and other Executive colleagues on 5 March 2024. (AQT 151/22-27)

Dr Archibald: The response to the question for written answer that the Member will have received will reflect the official correspondence that we received from Treasury about the financial package and any moneys that had been unring-fenced. That is the date in my response to which the Member is referring. I cannot answer for the Education Minister on the correspondence to which he is referring. As I have said previously, the decision on unring-fencing any moneys was taken by the Treasury, not the Executive. We are therefore left to deal with the consequences of that.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, you said that you are left dealing with the consequences of the removal of the ring fence, but one of the consequences is not that the Executive have to remove money. It is really important to nail that myth. A ring fence being removed does not remove the money from those schools. That was a decision made by the Executive. Was it made by the Education Minister or was it made by you in conjunction with the Education Minister? It is really important that we be precise about that. Removing the ring fence does not cut the

funding. That was a decision that the Executive made.

Dr Archibald: I understand that the Member is referring to the £150 million of Fresh Start funding. Again, I cannot speak on behalf of the Education Minister, but I understand that the 10 integrated schools were part of the Department of Education's capital programme. As the Member will know, the Executive agreed to earmark funding for the Strule campus. The unring-fenced funding in financial capital has made been available to the Executive as resource, not capital, money, so it is all there in the package. We have considerable challenges and pressures facing our resource budget, so it will be for the Executive to decide how to allocate funding as part of the Budget process.

Northern Ireland Act 1998: Section 64(1)

T2. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Finance, in light of the fact that section 64(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 is very clear and states that the Minister of Finance "shall, before the beginning of each financial year, lay before the Assembly a draft budget", whether she has considered the legal consequences of her flagrant breach of the statutory duty that the law places on her. (AQT 152/22-27)

Dr Archibald: The Member will be aware of the challenges facing the Assembly and the Executive with the time frame for the Budget for the previous financial year and also for this financial year. He will also be aware that the same section of the 1998 Act requires that I lay a statement in the Assembly after I have been informed by the Secretary of State of the funding for the incoming financial year, and I did that prior to Easter.

Mr Allister: The Minister has not answered the question. What are the legal consequences of her flagrant breach of the statutory duty under section 64(1) to lay a Budget? What example is it to set our citizens if we say to them, "The Minister can defy the law, but you must obey the law that this Assembly made"?

Dr Archibald: I have clearly laid out the time frame for when I intend to lay a Budget before the Assembly. I have set it out in a number of the debates that we have had on the Budget since the Assembly and the Executive were restored. Obviously, these are not ideal circumstances. I have been very upfront about that, but we have to deal with the circumstances that we are in. We will be

working at pace to bring forward a Budget in the coming weeks.

Business Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 1996

T3. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Finance whether she intends to introduce legislation pursuant to the recommendations of the 2011 Northern Ireland Law Commission report to allow limited contracting out of the Business Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. (AQT 153/22-27)

Dr Archibald: If the Member agrees, I will write to her on that question.

Miss McIlveen: I appreciate that this may come from left field, but I would appreciate it if the Minister could also write to me on whether she has any intention to bring forward legislation to bring into law the recommendations of the Northern Ireland Law Commission, following its review in 2013 relating to apartments, to address the problems experienced by those who own and live in apartments and other properties with elements of shared ownership. I declare an interest as someone who owns an apartment.

Dr Archibald: The Member is talking about the management of those properties. Some initial scoping work has been undertaken to introduce legislation to give freeholders of private and mixed-tenure estates equivalent rights to those of leaseholders. No further work has been progressed in the interim, due to budgetary constraints faced by my Department.

The regulation of property management companies is a policy area of interest to a number of Departments. In the coming weeks, I will engage with officials to assess how the issue can be addressed in the context of the competing priorities and available resources.

Derelict Buildings

T4. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Finance whether she has any plans to bring derelict buildings and properties back into good use, given that she will be aware that many of our towns and villages are suffering due to derelict buildings, which affect neighbouring businesses. (AQT 154/22-27)

Dr Archibald: One of the initiatives that we have taken is the back in business scheme, which aims to bring empty properties that were previously for retail use back into use for

businesses, and to give rate relief to businesses of 50% for up to two years. That initiative had been in place previously, and, through the high street task force work in the previous mandate, it was recommended that we should bring it back.

There is an important piece of work to do on how we get businesses into our towns and villages to use those spaces, and on how to have different uses for those spaces, such as for housing in town centres and recreation spaces. In respect of my Department and the rating system, there are some measures that could be looked at as part of a broader strategic look at the reform of rates.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that there are financial restrictions on many of the people who own the properties and that many of the properties will cost tens — maybe hundreds — of thousands of pounds to bring back, what I am trying to get from you, Minister, is whether you have plans to bring forward a meaningful financial package so that those business premises can be brought back into use.

Dr Archibald: Some of that will fall to me, in my remit, and some of it will fall to other Ministers, including the Communities Minister and the Economy Minister, through their responsibilities and their priorities for their Departments. I will consider any proposals that other Ministers bring forward on that.

Baby Loss Certificates

T5. **Mrs Dillon** asked the Minister of Finance whether her Department is considering the introduction of baby loss certificates. (AQT 155/22-27)

Dr Archibald: I have a response on baby loss certificates. Just give me a second to find it. *[Pause.]* Sorry, I have lost my answer, but this is obviously a very sensitive issue, and I have asked officials to look at it. We want to give recognition to parents. We want to consider the issue fully.

Mrs Dillon: Thank you, Minister. As you said, this is a very sensitive issue for any family that has lost a child. It is really important to those parents and families that there is recognition of the loss of their child and of the fact that their child existed. Will you confirm that the responsibility for issuing baby loss certificates comes under your Department and that, if possible, you would issue them retrospectively

for parents who have already suffered the loss of a child?

Dr Archibald: I am aware that the Health Minister is also looking into the issue and is engaging with officials in the Department of Health and Social Care in England on the baby loss certificate scheme that they have put in place. I will reach out to the Health Minister to look at where we can work together to bring forward appropriate measures to do the same here. I have asked my officials to look at the issue in respect of the responsibilities that my Department has, but, clearly, we have to look across Departments as well.

Mr Speaker: Paul Frew has withdrawn his question.

Budget Process: Climate Considerations

T7. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Finance to outline how she intends to incorporate climate considerations in the Budget process. (AQT 157/22-27)

Dr Archibald: We are going through the Budget process, so Departments will be making their various bids as part of that. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs is also working through the climate action plan process and consultations. I am sure that Departments will make various bids in that regard.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for that reply. Related to climate considerations, what strategic support and leadership is the Department providing to meet the requirements of the Climate Change Act, as set out in the Department's business plan?

Dr Archibald: All Departments have obligations under the new climate legislation. We have been working closely with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in respect of our climate responsibilities and those of the Executive more broadly. It will be a significant piece of work for all Departments in the coming months and years.

Northern Ireland Fiscal Council

T8. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Finance to confirm when legislation will be introduced in the Assembly to put the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council on a statutory footing. (AQT 158/22-27)

Dr Archibald: That is a piece of work that the Department was working on while the institutions were down. We are looking to bring it forward and progress it in the near future. Although specific timings need to be firmed up, I am seeking to put it in the Assembly's legislative programme as soon as possible. An Executive paper is being prepared for that purpose to seek agreement to proceed. As I said, significant preparatory work has been undertaken. The former Finance Minister circulated a draft document to ministerial colleagues and the NIO to seek initial views. Officials continue to engage with the Office of the Legislative Counsel, which agreed to begin work on the Fiscal Council Bill while the institutions were down and at risk to develop the legislation, given that it was a New Decade, New Approach commitment. It continues to provide advice and assistance on the policy development.

Ms Armstrong: Related to that, Minister, will you consider including within the statutory remit of the Fiscal Council an assessment of the cost of division in Northern Ireland and the effect that that has on public services, following yesterday's successful motion?

Dr Archibald: That is not something that I will be putting in the Fiscal Council Bill. The Fiscal Council will have the ability to set its own work programme and do work within the scope of the broad remit that it will be given in the legislation.

North/South Ministerial Council: Benefits

T9. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Finance, in light of her attendance at the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council on Monday, which is to be welcomed, for her assessment of its benefits. (AQT 159/22-27)

Dr Archibald: It is good that the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are back in place and that we have the North/South Ministerial Council back up and working. It provides an important forum for all-island cooperation and collaboration across a number of areas. I have specific responsibility for the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). Some really important work is being rolled out. SEUPB did a really good job, while the institutions were down, of continuing to implement its work programme.

Mr Gildernew: Minister, will you give us an update on PEACE PLUS?

Dr Archibald: As the Member will know, PEACE PLUS is worth approximately £1 billion. It will build on the work of the previous Peace programmes and INTERREG programmes, promoting economic and social inclusion and peace and prosperity across the North and the border counties.

It officially opened for funding calls on 15 June 2023. A total of 19 funding calls opened for applications, and 13 subsequently closed. Work on opening calls, assessing projects and taking funding decisions will continue apace throughout the rest of the year.

2.45 pm

Since December, the steering committees have taken decisions to award approximately £207 million of PEACE PLUS funding to successful project applications across several investment areas. That will include — the Member will have seen the announcement on this today — the £143.5 million to upgrade the Belfast-Dublin Enterprise service; £40 million for youth programmes; £11.3 million for local community action plans; and £11.3 million for shared education programmes.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Finance.

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2023-24 and Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates: Vote On Account 2024-25

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £23,937,688,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2024 and that resources, not exceeding £28,817,828,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2024 as summarised for each Department or other public body in column 4 of table 2 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2023-2024 that was laid before the Assembly on 20 March 2024.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £15,724,763,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2025 and that resources, not exceeding £18,731,611,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2025, as

summarised for each Department or other public body in column 4 of table 1 in the Northern Ireland Estimates Vote on Account 2024-2025 that was laid before the Assembly on 20 March 2024.

Mr Speaker: We now move back to the motion on the spring Supplementary Estimates, and I call John Blair.

Mr Blair: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am speaking as Alliance spokesperson for agriculture, environment and rural affairs, and I will talk about how the Supply Estimates and draft spending proposals impact on pollution remedies, climate obligations and a number of other DAERA responsibilities.

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

There is no doubt that the absence of a Government for the past two years impacted on how our Departments are being funded. That includes the scrutiny of figures, which needs to be improved. It has resulted in a need for transformation in the work of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in particular. The Department oversees one of our largest carbon emitters, but it also has ample opportunities to deliver on our climate change targets. A truly just transition requires funding of those opportunities. I hope that the Minister can reflect on that when she speaks later.

In order to achieve that delivery, the Department must be in a position to formalise the many overdue policies and strategies that remained stagnated alongside the Assembly's collapse. Those include the biodiversity strategy, the marine strategy, the peatland strategy and the clean air strategy. It is also, quite frankly, disgraceful that, in 2024, according to the most recent RSPB 'State of Nature' report, 12% of our species are being threatened with extinction and the area of certified woodland has continued to decrease despite increasing in England. In addition, around half our protected areas are in unfavourable conditions. That situation demands investment. Northern Ireland has many natural assets, but if we continue that trend, we will cause lasting damage.

There are many opportunities for restoration and recovery. The Department must seize on those immediately, but it can do that only if it is properly funded. That is not to mention how the Department has been working on reduced budgets for animal welfare, including welfare in veterinary services. Those areas must, instead,

be increased and improved upon. That is also true of the rural affairs aspect of the Department, which brings its own demands on connectivity, rural isolation, access to services and addressing the urban/rural divide.

Separate from all those statutory commitments, the Department is well placed to engage with the community and maximise opportunities for the public to avail themselves of the facilities in forests and fisheries in order to help those who wish to be outdoors and active, assist in healthy lifestyles, appreciate nature and, whilst doing that, reach some of the most disadvantaged and isolated members of our community. It would be a shame if such outreach were ever seen as low-hanging fruit when it comes to budgetary pressures and budget cuts.

Those budgetary pressures must be addressed in the context of the motions. In short, the required processes brought by Brexit, the environmental challenges that I outlined, change in support mechanisms for our agriculture sector, those climate action commitments and the required resource for all those means that DAERA funding must be protected and awarded in a more meaningful and targeted way. Ring-fenced funding is required for climate, environmental protection and governance, which would include, for example, Lough Neagh, an environmental improvement plan and animal welfare. It hardly needs saying that rectifying the problems at Lough Neagh will come at a considerable price.

I want to put on record my thanks, however, to the AERA Minister for his work in his new role to date, particularly in his commitment to tackling the Lough Neagh blue-green algae issue and broader issues surrounding water quality in Northern Ireland. That is something that I highlighted in detail in my Member's statement this morning. I will continue, with others, to work closely with the Minister and alongside Committee colleagues to achieve the necessary positive outcomes, hopefully delivered through appropriate funding streams.

I wish to reiterate the importance of cross-departmental collaboration in achieving the change necessary for our communities as well as our planet. Such contributions across Departments are vital to ensure that initiatives are future-proofed and receive sustainable funding. Ultimately, the current momentum within the sectors governed by DAERA must be sustained and built upon to achieve a greener and cleaner future for us all.

Mr Boylan: Today's motion is an annual Budget procedure, and I welcome the opportunity to speak on the matter.

In 2023, when the North had already suffered years of chronic underfunding, the Tories imposed cuts of up to £1 billion to our public services, including vital front-line services. As spokesperson and as a member of the Infrastructure Committee, I will focus on the impact that such cuts have made within the Infrastructure Department.

The remit of the Department is vast: from major capital projects and road safety to planning policy and water and waste water infrastructure. It also includes our public transport network and community transport, which is key to providing equal access to services and protecting people from social isolation. Many people depend on those services for getting to work or school and for connectivity. It also has a huge role to play in tackling the climate crisis and making our society greener and more sustainable.

Meanwhile, our roads are vital to our everyday lives. People deserve to be able to use our roads safely. Unfortunately, as it stands, our roads are not up to scratch. On that matter, I welcome the swift response taken by Minister O'Dowd, when he assumed office, to invest over £9 million in road repairs to help tackle the problem across the North.

Those are just a few examples of the importance of the Department. It is clear that those services are essential to our day-to-day functioning; so too are the staff who work vigorously to deliver them. I am sure that everyone in the Chamber agrees that we need to properly fund such essential services in order to deliver what people need and deserve. It is important to note that we are being underfunded, a sentiment recognised by the Fiscal Council.

Despite the difficult financial situation, I commend the work undertaken by Minister O'Dowd so far, including securing additional investment for road repairs, announcing measures to improve MOT services and progressing important schemes such as the A4 Enniskillen bypass.

On the issue of funding, I welcome the Irish Government's investment in important cross-border projects, including the A5, Narrow Water bridge and improving the Dublin to Belfast rail line.

Whilst positive developments have been made, it is clear that we are still in very challenging

times. Sinn Féin is ready and willing to work with other parties in pressing the British Government to address their underfunding of the North. We need to rid ourselves of the devastating cuts and to properly fund our public services. It is important that we make our opposition absolutely clear to the British Government and make it clear that their harmful Budgets, which inflict harm on the most vulnerable, must come to an end.

Mr Dickson: I speak not only as justice spokesperson for the Alliance Party but as an East Antrim MLA and a member of the Justice Committee.

The past year has presented unprecedented challenges for the Department of Justice, making it one of the most difficult periods of its recent history. While I welcome the announcement of security funding and funding for the tackling paramilitarism programme, it rather pales into insignificance when compared with the underfunding that our justice system faces on all fronts. The stark reality is that our justice system is teetering on the brink. Despite the efforts of Ministers past and present, the unprecedented cost-saving efficiencies delivered by officials, which were further impacted by the demands of the Department of Finance and the Secretary of State, coupled with the shameful failure of those who brought down the Assembly for the past two years, mean that there is simply no financial room left. Since the devolution of justice powers, there has been a glaring disparity in the allocation of funding. While the Department of Health's budget has surged by 68% and that of Education by over 35%, Justice has been left behind with a meagre 3% increase that, amid escalating demands across the board, from policing and legal aid to prisons and youth justice, the impacts of new and important laws, coupled with inflationary pressures, has the potential to cause effects that will be felt at every corner of society that is impacted by our justice and police systems.

The Department's budget is stretched thin. It is consumed almost entirely by staff costs and statutory commitments, which relegate discretionary spending to less than 1%. Over the past decade, the Department has been squeezed tighter and forced to do more with less until, now, there is simply nothing left to trim. The growth of our prison population, which has seen a 30% increase since January 2021, has further strained our facilities to breaking point. That spike, driven by judicial delays and backlogs exacerbated by the pandemic, necessitates not only the doubling up of prisoners in cells but the reopening of outdated

facilities, which, in turn, require more staff. That pressure-cooker environment jeopardises the stability of our prison system and the success of rehabilitation and resettlement programmes. I am keen to delve into those cornerstones of public safety in the future in the Justice Committee. The ripple effect extends to legal aid, a cornerstone of access to justice, yet, again, one that is chronically underfunded. The systemic underfunding and resultant delays corrode the very foundation of our justice delivery, affecting legal professionals and, ultimately, the timely and proper delivery for all.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognise the demand-led nature of our justice system. Unlike in other services, we cannot predict who comes in or why. Often, those who enter the justice system have slipped through the nets of other support services, such as family support services and education, especially in cases of mental health issues or substance abuse. I have seen recently at first hand on a number of prison visits the shocking failure of those services and the impact that that has on the lives of people who would otherwise never be in prison. Our Department of Justice acts as the ultimate safety net, and this situation therefore demands from the Department of Finance a budget that is not only sufficient but forward-thinking and ready to tackle the issues directly.

In closing, the erosion of the Justice budget to funnel resources elsewhere poses grave risks. The services delivered by the Department of Justice are not merely line items but the bedrock of public protection: from community safety to policing and from our Courts and Tribunals Service and all the many and varied roles and responsibilities of the Department of Justice. While today's debate is about looking back on the finance of the Department, without a significant realignment of the Justice budget to reflect its critical needs, we will face, and we stand to face, profound consequences.

Ms Armstrong: Minister, this is another long one for you today. Thank you very much for sticking with us; there are a lot of us contributing today. We are here to vote on the spring Supplementary Estimates, and I appreciate that it is a technical matter that completes the financial year that has just gone past. We should also look forward to when we will consider the Vote on Account that enables the Executive to spend money to keep this place afloat until such time as a Budget for 2024-25 is created.

3.00 pm

This is the perfect opportunity to discuss the impacts of the 2023-24 Budget, as so many who have spoken before me today have done. As communities spokesperson for the Alliance Party, I get to see how difficult the lack of a progressive Budget is for the people who live in Northern Ireland. The Department for Communities recently reissued its 'Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report, 2022/23'. It confirms that we have more children and more working-age adults living in absolute poverty. I expect that, when the updated report is issued for 2023-24, the numbers of people living in poverty will increase again, and that is shameful.

In response, an emerging group of 14 organisations called Cost of Living 24 that includes Inspire Wellbeing, Housing Rights, South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP), Advice NI, Carers NI and the Healthy Living Centre Alliance will launch an online, updated cost-of-living response based on the Inspire Wellbeing website that was launched during COVID. Cost of Living 24, on the Community Wellbeing NI website, will be aimed at people accessing support for the first time, which is a trend that we see across our food banks in Northern Ireland. It is not just people on benefits but people who are working who can no longer afford to heat their home and eat. The website will offer advice on money and debt, food and energy costs, benefits and grants, and housing, including what help may be available for people who are in rent or mortgage arrears. It will offer support for people with disabilities, carers, older persons and those with pet expenses and provide details of local advice centres across Northern Ireland.

The reason that the group has stepped up is that the Trussell Trust reported in February 2024 — this is looking back at the financial year that we have just come through — that 55% of people receiving universal credit in Northern Ireland ran out of food in January 2024 and could not afford more. Some 14,000 people claiming universal credit in Northern Ireland have needed to use a food bank in the past month. More than half of the people claiming universal credit in Northern Ireland — 62% — are either behind on bills and credit commitments or find it a constant struggle to keep themselves warm. Four in 10 people — 62,000 people claiming universal credit — have fallen into debt because they could not keep up with essential bills.

The 2023-24 Budget was, as we know, set by the Secretary of State because there was no Executive and no Assembly. It was only when this place was finally able to get back to work

that moneys from the agreement could be released to take some pressure off the people who live in poverty, people whom we are supposed to help. Additional money was able to be spent on discretionary support, which is a lifeline to the people whom the Trussell Trust talked about.

In the past year, we did not have enough money to build enough homes. We have the worst waiting lists for social housing and the highest ever number of people who are homeless. Our partners in the community and voluntary sector, on whom we depend to deliver so many social interventions, including supporting people and access to employment and training for those who are furthest from employment, need the financial confidence of multi-year Budgets. Having worked for many years in that sector prior to becoming an MLA, I am fully aware of the pressures placed on those organisations. Their staff face the constant threat of redundancy; in some cases, it is an annual threat. The freeze on Northern Ireland Civil Service recruitment means that the Department for Communities is under significant pressure to deliver large programmes of work, including the move to universal credit.

Looking forward, we need to change how this place works. We need a Programme for Government that is underpinned by previously agreed strategies such as the anti-poverty strategy, which should include targeted actions to ensure that no child here lives in poverty. Social strategies, including the disability strategy, the racial equality strategy and the investment strategy, are all listed as key supporting strategies, and we have already agreed them in the House.

We also need to improve our timing to ensure that the Budget works to deliver the Programme for Government. That is not what, I suspect, will be the case in 2024-25, where the Budget will determine and limit actions. I therefore challenge the Minister of Finance to confirm how she will ensure that such a large Vote on Account is not needed again in this mandate. I ask her to give a commitment to the House that the 2024-25 Budget will be the last Budget in this mandate that is brought to the House before a Programme for Government is decided.

As I said, we need to look forward and change how this place works. We need to commit to upholding a working Government to ensure that we never again leave people in Northern Ireland to suffer under a Budget introduced by a Secretary of State. We can do that through

reform, whereby every Member in the Assembly has an equal vote and vetoes are no longer the shadow hanging over this place or the people whom we are supposed to support. Minister, I hope that you can give me that commitment today.

Mr Donnelly: I speak today as the Alliance spokesperson for health, and I will highlight some of the priorities facing the Department of Health.

As my colleagues have indicated, we will support the motion, and I thank the Finance Minister for tabling it. As we have heard many times today, there is no question that every Minister and Department are facing severe financial pressures, and Health is no different.

In the Health Committee on 14 March, the Minister indicated that additional significant investment would be required to deal with some of the key issues facing the Department. We can see some of those pressures throughout our health service. We have previously discussed waiting lists in the Assembly, and it must be an urgent priority of the Department to tackle our unacceptable waiting lists. Too many people across Northern Ireland are suffering as they languish on waiting lists, getting sicker, losing mobility, having mental health issues and, sometimes, not even getting the surgery they have waited for.

We will all have heard the shocking statistics over the last few months and years, but a recent report on the performance of Northern Ireland's healthcare highlighted that 60% of patients had waited for more than a year for in-patient treatment at June 2023, compared with just 5% of patients waiting more than a year to complete the entire pathway from referral to treatment in England. The report starkly describes a system operating at the very edge of its capacity and capability, highlighting that it is not fit for purpose and needs to evolve considerably in the coming years.

Domiciliary care is another area that urgently needs to be addressed. Many people cannot access domiciliary care packages to ensure that they can be cared for in their home. In November 2021, Minister Swann invested £23 million to improve the terms and conditions of domiciliary care workers in the independent sector. That was welcome at the time, but we need further protection and support for our domiciliary care workers. It was also welcome that the first Adjournment debate of this Assembly mandate was about domiciliary care packages. It affects many families in East

Antrim, and I am sure that that is the same for all MLAs across the Chamber.

As mentioned in that debate, the timely provision of domiciliary care packages lessens the pressure on hospitals and therefore on waiting times by allowing people to be supported in their own home. Being able to safely discharge patients when they become medically fit makes more beds available in the wards for patients who need to be admitted for care and improves patient flow throughout our hospitals. People are arriving at A&E departments in ambulances, waiting outside in an ambulance and then waiting in crowded A&Es for a bed for further treatment. Further investment is required to continue to alleviate the pressures on the domiciliary care sector.

Another crisis in our community is our community pharmacy sector. The Department of Health has taken a number of measures in recent months, such as the authorisation of £4.8 million by the permanent secretary in November 2023 and £10.1 million authorised to help stabilise the service by the Minister in February 2024. Those were helpful but cannot resolve the long-standing funding deficit that has been building for over 15 years. In addition to resolving the £15 million shortfall, immediate policy changes are required, such as a reviewed community pharmacy contract and a drug tariff specific to Northern Ireland that recognises our unique factors.

The challenges facing our GP surgeries are also evident. We will all be very aware of the impact they have had on GP appointments. Every day, we hear from constituents about how difficult it is to access their GPs. The conditions simply are not there in the practices to meet demand. Chronic underfunding, a lack of proper workforce planning and the impact of the COVID pandemic have provided a perfect storm of conditions to lead the service to this breaking point. The findings of a recent Audit Office report include that almost one in three GP practices have sought crisis support services in the last four years; 13 practices handed back their contracts or gave notice of doing so between March 2022 and March 2023; and 39 practices were assessed as being at risk as of March 2023. That speaks to a full-blown crisis.

Primary care has become more difficult and challenging, particularly in rural areas, and I have seen that at first hand in my constituency of East Antrim. The year 2023 was the worst to date for GP surgeries having to hand back contracts. We must take steps to address the challenges facing general practice in Northern

Ireland. That should include an indemnity solution for GPs in Northern Ireland, who are disadvantaged in comparison with the rest of the UK due to the higher personal cost of indemnity. We must also urgently recommence the roll-out of multidisciplinary teams that began in 2018 but has effectively stalled since then. As with so many of these issues, funding will be key.

The wider transformation of our health and social care service must be an overarching priority for the Department. The Bengoa report has been sitting on a shelf since 2016, and we have missed opportunities for genuine reform through the lack of progress on that. It was envisaged as a 10-year programme, but we are now more than three quarters of the way through that 10-year period with almost no progress. The main reason for that has been wider political instability. The absence of a functioning Executive and Assembly for five out of the last seven years has resulted in the absence of financial decisions and scrutiny. With last year's Budget, we saw the devastating impact of that stalemate, with an unaccountable Secretary of State making decisions over which we, as MLAs, had no say. Until we see genuine reform of our political institutions to ensure that never again can one party prevent the Assembly and Executive from functioning, we will not be able to commit to the transformation that is required to fix our health service and ensure the best outcomes for our people.

The importance of having an Executive and a Health Minister in place has been reinforced by the positive steps towards a pay settlement for the health and social care service in Northern Ireland through the proposed consolidated pay uplift and the non-consolidated payment. Minister Swann rightly identified pay as a priority. It is clear from the previous restoration in 2020 that progress can be made on such essential workforce issues only with a Minister and a full Executive in place. We must never again allow our valued healthcare staff to go without the fair pay that they deserve. Without the workforce, there is no health service and there can be no transformation.

While those pressures are significant and further investment is clearly needed, we must also assess the effectiveness of what we spend on the health service in relation to outcomes. We will continue to push for transparency on health spending to ensure that we get as much as we can for the money that is spent. The Minister must be clear on how investment is addressing the pressures and improving outcomes for the huge number of people who continue to suffer ill health, be that on waiting

lists or in crowded wards or dangerously overcrowded A&E departments.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Donnelly: Thank you.

Mr Allister: This is, essentially, a farcical debate, because the first Supply resolution that we are discussing is for a financial year that is over. The whole purpose of the processes of the House is to sanction expenditure before it happens. Today, however, we have spent three or four hours debating expenditure that is already closed: a Supply resolution that refers to the 2023-24 Budget year.

When we had the debate on the Budget Bill a few weeks ago, the Minister came up with the lamest of excuses: she did not have time to prepare the Supplementary Estimates. That just does not bear scrutiny. These Estimates are not compiled by the Minister; they are compiled by her civil servants, who were not away for two years. They were working and had all the data on their system to produce this at speed. Yet, the Department chose not to produce it for the Budget debate and to have us debate the Budget blind to the figures. Then, belatedly and retrospectively, they produce a document that they could have had before us at the proper time, because it is the document that supports the Budget Bill.

We know, however, not least from today's Question Time, just how cavalier the Minister's attitude is to the law. When she was asked why she had broken the law at section 64(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which says that the Minister must lay a draft Budget Bill before the close of the financial year, she had no answer other than to pathetically say, "We must consider the circumstances that we are in". I am sorry, but, when I read section 64(1), I do not read, "The Minister of Finance shall, before the beginning of each financial year, lay before the Assembly a draft budget, unless the circumstances prevent it": it is a mandatory requirement. When I asked her what the legal consequences were for her and for the Assembly and the Executive of failing to live up to that statutory obligation, there was no answer. Perhaps there will be an answer to that question — perhaps I expect too much — in the round-up to the debate. I suspect not.

3.15 pm

Here we are, debating something for which the money has been spent. It has all passed. Of

course, some of the money was spent in a way that totally disregards the processes of the House, because almost £24 million was spent on black box, meaning that there was no statutory authority other than the Budget Bill, which has long since gone. The Department for Communities spent £11 million and the Executive Office spent almost £11 million on no statutory authority other than the Budget Bill. The advice is that you cannot spend above £1.5 million, if I recall correctly, other than on statutory authority. Yet the House spends £24 million without statutory authority, but, then, we seem to live in an environment where spending money is not a concern.

Look today at the 'Belfast Telegraph' article on the squandering on excessive salaries in the upper echelons of local government. We discover that every chief executive in local government in Northern Ireland is paid more than the First Minister or the deputy First Minister. Indeed, one of them, who did not do one day's work in the year in question because she was on suspension, was paid £188,000. The former chief executive of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, Anne Donaghy, was paid £188,000, and, in the same council, we have the scandal of a director, employed through an agency, getting paid over £1,000 a day. The council, in its foolishness, has just extended the contract for another 18 months. For two and a half years, instead of employing somebody through regular procurement processes, somebody has been employed at over £1,000 a day as a director in Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. Then we wonder why we are short of money.

If you look at all those chief executives, you will discover that some of them are paid almost as much as the Prime Minister. Some of them have not covered themselves in glory, like the chief executive of Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, Mr David Jackson, who has been the object of a number of adverse findings and whose council has been subject to a special audit adverse findings. I declare an interest as one of the complainants against him. He was found responsible for a number of issues, not least the infamous £1 land deal of that particular council. Yet he is paid £146,000 a year. Where is the accountability? We need not look to Stormont for accountability, but Stormont and a former Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs told us that the reform of local government would save £400 million. Where is it? It seems that the big savings that were promised turned into big salaries and big rate rises for our ratepayers. Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, which I have been referring to, had a council rate rise of

10% this year. That is maybe no wonder, given that it is paying a non-attending chief executive more than the Prime Minister is paid and paying a director over £1,000 a day. Where is the financial accountability in all those things?

Then we come to the Vote on Account. Of course, that is at the huge level of 65%. No doubt, that is because the Executive have no confidence that they will be able to produce a Budget before the end of July, which is when the normal Vote on Account would run out. Therefore, they have given themselves the greatest possible headroom.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Allister: We will get a Budget that will have no alignment with the missing Programme for Government —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. Please take your seat.

Mr Allister: — such is the farce and the shambles of this place.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes. OK. Great.

Mr Carroll: The Finance Minister is today effectively asking us to endorse a new round of Tory-mandated austerity. Once again, the Executive are allowing themselves to be constrained and directed by a Government who are intent on destroying our public services and imposing a fresh round of pay cuts on public-sector workers. When a Budget Bill was rammed through the Assembly some weeks ago in the absence of spring Supplementary Estimates, my party warned that the Government were pulling the wool over people's eyes. We warned that the lack of scrutiny would suit the Executive's nefarious short-term agenda but have wide-ranging and harmful implications for people across the North. Absurd as it is, we are not just retroactively approving the spending of money already spent, and the Finance Minister is not asking us to simply let Departments keep spending or avail themselves of the theoretical headroom that some Members alluded to. She is asking us to hamstring Departments at the behest of the Secretary of State and to sign up to a fresh round of cuts that will decimate our health service, schools and communities across the board when the time comes.

The motion refers to information that was provided to the Finance Committee on 20

March. Let me read something from that. The Finance Minister said:

"All Ministers have committed to constraining their Department's expenditure, including pay awards, to the budget allocation agreed by the Executive and not by the amount of headroom included in the SSEs, if it is higher."

There is talk about Tory austerity, but that is a commitment from Ministers, once again, to implement it. The Finance Minister said that she would work to ensure:

"the amount of Treasury funding required by any draft Budget does not exceed the amount notified by the Secretary of State".

What are those who bemoan Tory cuts saying when they agree to do their dirty work for them? What are they saying to the workers whose pay awards are outstanding? It was said earlier that pay awards were gratefully received by public-sector workers. First, it must be said that most of those workers were given a real-terms pay cut of about 6%. Secondly, we know that further education workers, transport workers, junior doctors and others are still in dispute and waiting for a pay rise. They will be due a further pay rise when all is said and done from today.

It does not take much to scratch the surface and see the Executive's regressive economic agenda. I say this to MLAs who will speak tomorrow of the need to fund this or that programme or service: think hard about what you are signing up to today. Think of the hypocrisy of bemoaning Tory cuts that your colleagues have agreed to endorse. How can you stand here with a straight face and talk about hospital waiting lists, educational underachievement, poverty and poor pay when you are foisting those very things on people and making them worse? If you truly believe that the money provided by the Tories is not enough, at what point do you stand up to them? Will you stick to the spending set out by the Secretary of State or will you invest in our health service, schools, housing or workers' pay — the future of our people? You cannot have it both ways. You cannot say that you oppose Tory cuts while explicitly saying, as the Finance Minister has, in black and white, that you will adhere to their budget and their economic agenda.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Member very much — I nearly gave you a Minister title there — for giving way. Where will he get the money to spend on all that he talks about?

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

Mr Carroll: The Member knows that I am not a Minister. Her party is in the Executive. The Member will know, if she listens to my speeches or to my comments in the Finance Committee, that I have repeatedly talked about the bulging corporate profits in the North. I believe that the Alliance Party still wants to cut corporation tax in the North. You do not? You have changed your position. OK, that is positive. We need to make those corporations pay more, but I have not heard your party talk about raising corporation tax. I am talking about your party clamouring for those organisations to pay more in corporate wealth taxes. If you are for doing that, I support you, and I am glad to see that you have changed position, but you are still for cutting corporation tax — you can clarify or challenge that if you want — or maintaining a corporation tax cut.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will give way again; sure.

Mr Dickson: I am interested to tease out with the Member that business about where the additional funding would come from. Given that the vast majority of businesses in Northern Ireland are small or medium-sized businesses that struggle to pay their employees and their tax bills, where exactly would that funding come from?

Mr Carroll: The Member knows that that is not who pays corporation tax; it is large organisations. Corporate profits have increased in the past two years, so there is plenty of money to be paid up. If you tackle corporate taxes, increase them, tax corporate profits and put them into public services, there will be plenty of money to fund our services. I note that the party opposite is opposed to that and wants, once again, to give tax breaks to corporations. We will not be endorsing this farce or this farcical economic strategy today. Workers and working-class communities deserve a lot better, and I do not think that we should accept that.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance, Dr Caoimhe Archibald, to conclude the debate on the motion. The Minister has up to 40 minutes — sorry, 35 minutes. It is a big difference.

Dr Archibald: Thank you, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.]* I will

delight Members by telling them that I do not intend to take that amount of time.

I thank Members, Chairs and Deputy Chairs, and all those who have contributed to today's debate. It is always helpful to me, as Finance Minister, to hear the views of respective Committees and Members on these important financial and economic issues that face all of us. I have noted the issues raised by Members, and, as I close the debate, I will endeavour to respond to the comments that have been made. Throughout the debate, a number of Members referred to this being a less than ideal process. I recognise that and have been very clear that it does not set a precedent for us going forward.

I will address some of the specific comments made by individuals. Matthew O'Toole, the leader of the Opposition, asked about the timescale for the outcome of the Executive's Budget. Obviously, he is quite correct that, in normal circumstances, that work should have been completed before the start of the financial year. As I have said on a number of occasions, we are not in normal circumstances. I have engaged with my ministerial colleagues over recent weeks to discuss the budget pressures facing all Departments. I will bring recommendations to the Executive shortly, and, subject to the Executive's agreement, it will be my intention to bring the Budget for 2024-25 to the Assembly before the end of the month.

The leader of the Opposition also criticised the absence of a multi-year Budget, and a number of Members referred to the desire for multi-year Budgets. Obviously, that is something that I would like to see as well. It is largely outside the Executive's control. Section 64 of the 1998 Act, which has been referred to during the debate, requires me, at least 14 days before laying a draft Budget, to lay a statement before the Assembly specifying the amount of funding for that year notified by the Secretary of State. I laid that statement on 26 March. It only covers the 2024-25 year, as that is the last year of the current spending review. Therefore, the Secretary of State could not tell me how much funding will be provided in the following two years, and, without that confirmation, I could not lay a Budget for those years. I can only budget according to the funding that has been notified to me, so it is not possible, at this point, to have a multi-year Budget.

Mr Brett asked about the EA non-teaching staff pay and grading review. I am pleased to confirm that, on 3 April, my officials provided expenditure approval for the proposed implementation of the non-teaching staff pay and grading review. It is now for the

Department of Education to consider its affordability to ensure that neither the Department nor the Executive as a whole are at risk of overspending against the Budget. I understand that initial implementation costs are expected to be approximately £180 million, with recurrent costs in future years ultimately expected to be in the region of £93 million. That will form part of the consideration of the Budget for 2024-25.

Phillip also asked about the enhanced investment zone. The financial package that accompanied the restoration of the Executive included £150 million for the enhanced investment zone. That now combines the free ports and investment zone programmes into one enhanced investment zone. Treasury has indicated that that funding will be open to flexible use between spend and a range of tax levers. The policy prospectus was published on 26 March, and work is now being led on the enhanced investment zone by the Department for the Economy. I will work closely with the Economy Minister, and I look forward to further collaboration between our respective Departments as the policy and programme develops and given my lead role in liaising with Treasury on taxation and spending matters. As an Executive, we will ensure that we develop an enhanced investment zone that will deliver for people and businesses here.

Funding for shared and integrated schools was raised by some Members during the debate, including Eóin Tennyson and Nick Mathison. The Members quite rightly stated that, although ring-fencing on some of the former Fresh Start funding has been removed, the funding itself has not been removed but is available to the Executive to prioritise.

As I mentioned during Question Time, that funding has been provided to the Executive as resource, not capital. The Member will be aware that the Education Minister and I recently announced the Executive's commitment of £150 million to take forward the Strule Shared Education Campus. The Education Minister has also committed to taking forward the further 10 shared and integrated education projects through his Department's capital budget programme.

3.30 pm

Mr Tennyson: I thank the Minister for giving way. I would like some clarity on the issue. The 10 integrated education projects are at a very different stage of development from that of Strule. As I understand it, Strule does not yet

have a business case, so why has the decision been made at this juncture to allocate the money to Strule now? Is it a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul? Is there a risk that all the schools will be disappointed as a result of the approach that the Ministers are taking?

Dr Archibald: The Member will appreciate that the specific issue with those projects falls to the Education Minister. A proposal was put to the Executive to earmark £150 million for the Strule campus. That is profiled over a number of years and is not a case of its receiving £150 million in one year. The Education Minister will have to prioritise the programmes that he takes forward as part of his capital budget programme.

Mr Tennyson, Joanne Bunting and Stewart Dickson raised issues with the Department of Justice budget and expressed concerns about the level of funding for that Department. Allocations agreed by the Executive for 2023-24 provided the Justice Minister with £75.3 million. That included some additional funding to address pay and other financial pressures in areas such as policing. There is still much to be done, and I, along with Executive colleagues, am working on the Justice budget for 2024-25.

The financial pressures that we face, however, far outstrip the funding that the British Government have provided. I continue to have robust conversations with counterparts in Treasury. As Members will appreciate, difficult decisions on the Budget will have to be made in the coming weeks. Mr Tennyson also raised the issue of revenue raising. That is an issue that all Departments are considering, but some have more ability than others to raise revenue in their area, and the Department of Justice is not one that has activities that lend themselves to revenue raising.

Mr McGrath raised the issue of health service waiting lists. The Member felt that applying the 65% Vote on Account across all Departments is not necessarily appropriate. I agree that waiting lists are unacceptably high. In February of this year, however, in responding to some of the latest waiting list statistics, the Health Minister indicated that some small gains had been made on the number of people waiting for inpatient and day-case admission. That is to be welcomed, and we all hope that that improvement continues. A small amount of money — £34 million — is available from the financial package for 2024-25 to tackle waiting lists, but it is clear that much more significant investment is needed if we are to achieve the transformation in the delivery of health services that is required. That is one of the reasons that I continue to press the case for the Executive's

resources to be put on more of a long-term sustainable footing.

Mr McGrath also mentioned GP indemnity. I know and understand that the arrangements for clinical negligence indemnity are a matter of concern for GPs locally. It is my understanding that the Health Minister is considering a number of options to deal with those concerns. We can consider proposals when the Health Minister brings them forward.

Kellie Armstrong made some comments about the Vote on Account and the Programme for Government and asked me to confirm that I would not bring a 65% Vote on Account to the Assembly again. Earlier, I explained why I took the exceptional decision to set the Vote on Account at 65%. It was as a result of the timing of the restoration of the Executive, which came at such a late stage in the financial year. I can assure the Assembly that I will be doing everything that I can to ensure that the Budget-setting timetable for future years will follow a more normal timetable and that the Assembly will have the time that it needs to consider its Budget allocations. Kellie also asked me to confirm that no Budget would be brought to the Assembly in advance of a Programme for Government for the rest of the mandate. I fully agree that the Budget and the Programme for Government should go hand in hand. Although it will certainly be my intention not to have another Budget in advance of a Programme of Government, that is not entirely in my gift. I can, however, make the commitment that it is my intention that it will not happen.

Mr Allister mentioned the timing of the SSEs and asked why the documents could not have been produced earlier. He will be very well aware that the SSEs cannot be produced until the Executive have decided on their Budget and expenditure plans, to which the SSEs are written. That work could not be carried out until we had an Executive. Given the size of the documents and the detail that is required to be set out, Members will appreciate that they take some time to produce and publish.

There are a lot of issues that we could continue to debate all day, but I will draw my remarks to a close. I have tried to respond to issues raised by Members and, as always, the debate has been wide and varied, and significant points have been made. I thank Members for their contributions and attention. I ask Members to agree the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2023-24 and the Vote on Account for 2024-25.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £23,937,688,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2024 and that resources, not exceeding £28,817,828,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2024 as summarised for each Department or other public body in column 4 of table 2 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2023-2024 that was laid before the Assembly on 20 March 2024.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £15,724,763,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2025 and that resources, not exceeding £18,731,611,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2025, as summarised for each Department or other public body in column 4 of table 1 in the Northern Ireland Estimates Vote on Account 2024-2025 that was laid before the Assembly on 20 March 2024. — [Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance).]

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item of business —.

Mr Allister: On a point of order —.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I am not finished yet. The next item of business is a motion to approve a statutory rule. Before we do that, however, I will take Mr Allister's point of order.

Mr Allister: Thank you. Is it not a requirement of Standing Orders that financial votes are on a cross-community basis? I have heard no finding that that was so.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: If you read Standing Orders, Mr Allister, you will see that that is required only at the final stage of financial —. I appreciate your point of order.

I ask Members to take their ease.

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

The draft Period Products (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The next item of business is a motion to affirm a statutory rule.

Mr Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I beg to move

That the draft Period Products (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Business Committee has agreed that there will be no time limit on the debate. I call the Minister to open the debate on the motion.

Mr Muir: Today, I am seeking the Assembly's approval of the Period Products (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024. It is a privilege for me to be able to introduce these regulations, part of a journey that began with the private Member's Bill that was brought by former SDLP MLA Pat Catney and subsequently became the Period Products (Free Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 to create a legal right of free access to items such as tampons and sanitary pads. The Act places importance on respect for dignity and aims to remove financial barriers to accessing period products.

These regulations relate to the Department's section 2 duties under the Act to meet an individual's needs while they are on specified public service bodies' premises. The Executive Office is progressing section 1 of the Act to require period products to be obtainable free of charge to all persons who need to use them. It is working with a delivery partner to ensure that free period products are publicly available to anyone who needs them across Northern Ireland from 13 May 2024. Access to period products should be universally available, as is the case for many other basic hygiene products. It is important that people have access to the products in a dignified and confidential way.

My Department is liaising with DAERA's specified public service bodies, namely the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, the Livestock and Meat Commission and the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority as to how these regulations will be implemented at their various premises throughout Northern Ireland. They include a requirement for them to give regard to articles that are reusable when they are putting their arrangements in place. There is growing interest in reusable period products, which have the potential to reduce the environmental impact of single-use items. They might include, for example, menstrual cups and reusable period pants. Our specified public service bodies will be carrying out their own consultation exercises with product users in due course after the regulations commence, with reusable products being part of that process, and I thank them for their cooperation thus far.

I thank the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee for its prompt scrutiny of the SL1 for this regulation.

Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): At its meeting on 7 March, the Committee considered a departmental written briefing on the SL1 for the Period Products (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024.

The Committee noted that the statutory rule (SR) is made under sections 2(1) and 2(13) of the Period Products (Free Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and is subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure.

3.45 pm

The Minister at the time highlighted the importance of the Act for providing the basis for

introducing vital support to tackle issues around period dignity. The Committee noted that the Act places a duty on the Executive Office to ensure that period products are widely available free of charge in public service premises. It also noted that the regulations are being made under the powers in the Act for public service bodies that have a duty to ensure that period products are widely obtainable free of charge in their premises. The Committee also noted that the regulations specify the public service bodies within the functions of DAERA that are subject to the duty; that funding for the provision will be bid for in line with normal financial planning procedure; and that the following bodies are designated specified public service bodies. The Minister has outlined them, so I do not need to repeat that.

The SL1 was considered, and the Committee was content for the draft SR to be made and to be subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure. At its meeting on 21 March, the Committee considered the draft Period Products (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 and further noted that they would not be made unless and until affirmed by resolution of the Assembly. Members then considered the fifth report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, which included the draft SR, and the Committee was content to note that the Examiner of Statutory Rules did not draw special attention to it.

The Committee agreed to recommend that the draft Period Products (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be affirmed and made by the Assembly.

Ms Sheerin: I welcome the regulations. It would be remiss not to mention, as the Minister did, the work of Pat Catney, who is no longer in the House but did an awful lot of work to bring the legislation forward.

Periods are difficult enough — as a woman, I know that — and we know that period poverty is a serious, cross-cutting issue. Women across the North who are living with low incomes have enough challenges without having to consider a money element of menstruation.

The regulations are to be welcomed. It is progressive, positive legislation. It is a brilliant example of what we can do when we work together, and I wholeheartedly welcome the introduction of free period products in public spaces. They are not luxury items; they are

healthcare, and we have to ensure that people have the right to healthcare and to dignity. The regulations will go some way to delivering that, so I commend them and congratulate everyone who has been involved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I thank those who have contributed to the debate. I call the Minister to conclude and wind up.

Mr Muir: I thank Members for their contributions and the Business Committee for scheduling the debate. This is important legislation. It is progressive, and it is an example of what the Assembly can do when we work together. I was glad to move the motion today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Period Products (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Members, please take your ease for a moment.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Housing: North Belfast

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): In conjunction with the Business Committee, the Speaker has given leave to Carál Ní Chuilín to raise the matter of housing in North Belfast. I call Carál Ní Chuilín, who has up to 15 minutes.

Ms Ní Chuilín: A LeasCheann Comhairle, can we wait for a couple of minutes to allow the Communities Minister to arrive? We are at least an hour early. Is that possible?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I am fully in agreement that it is OK to take our ease for a few moments. If Members are happy with that, I certainly am.

We will resume. Go ahead.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle. For your benefit, Minister, I did not want to start until you were here, so I asked for us to wait for a couple of minutes. I put on record my appreciation of your being here. I suspect that this is an issue that you are very interested in. I know that your party colleague Phillip Brett is, and, when Brian is here, he will be as well. I see that you have at least one of your officials there: David Polley. He will probably have you well briefed on housing statistics.

North Belfast is normally in the top three or four areas of greatest housing stress. I think that the concern for us all is that, as well as housing supply, there are many issues, but it is certainly about getting enough land to build houses where they are needed. Every part of the constituency needs homes. It is not just the part that I represent, live in or whatever; it is accepted that the need is everywhere. I think that my colleagues from North Belfast will appreciate that there are stubborn parts of North Belfast that have not meaningfully shifted. I hope that we take a collegial approach to that.

One of the issues that have exercised many people across most, but not all, of the parties in Belfast City Council is the emergence of many managed student accommodation blocks. Initially, when we asked, for example, Ulster University and Queen's University — it was less

Queen's and more Ulster — about the need for student beds in the city centre, they told us that it was 1,500. That figure has gone up to 15,000. I know that because I attended planning appeals against managed student accommodation in Union Street. Those were the figures that were put on the record.

There was not only a perception but a belief that any available land in that area had been earmarked under different housing strategies for potential social housing. When I was CAL Minister, we looked at whether land behind the central library could run contiguously. We wanted to use the "Public land for public housing" approach, where we could try to bring pockets of land together for housing. That was not achieved, certainly with DCAL, but it certainly was in terms of plot 8, which was DFC's, and the Belfast City Council piece of land in that area, which is now the strategic site assessment. The context is that any bit of land that could be used for development — there is a need for older people's housing, folds and different things— is gobbled up by private developers. We are asking for the Department, along with the Housing Executive but under your leadership in the Department, to be the advocate for housing need across our part of the constituency.

You have probably seen the figures, because I asked the questions. In North Belfast, there are around 4,400 applicants on the housing waiting list. Those figures are from 2022-23. A total of 3,479 are deemed to be living in housing stress, yet the estimate is that just 655 homes have been built. Ironically and disappointingly, they are not always in the areas of the constituencies that we represent. We are glad that those houses are built; we are just saying that they are not enough, and they are certainly not in the areas of greatest demand.

In relation to housing in North Belfast — I know that colleagues have experienced this across the piece — you would have had the potential of a supply coming from the private rented sector. That is not the case any more. In fact, I dealt with a constituent last Friday who works in the Mater Hospital and is paying almost £900 per month for accommodation in north Belfast. She is having to leave. She was successful in getting accommodation elsewhere, but she considers herself to be a member of the Catholic community and her kids go to secondary school, and the affordable property was in an area where children would not go to Catholic post-primary schools. She is concerned. It is not to say that people are deliberately setting out. She is rearing grown-up teenagers, and she is just concerned. Do you

know what the difference in rent is? £450 per month.

There are lots of reasons why the supply has not been maintained. Some landlords just cannot afford it. If it is a family home, they are selling it on; for others, it is just not the market for them. I have spoken to, I think, every housing association about whether they had approached the Department or, in particular, the Housing Executive to ask whether they had land or whether they could go into joint ventures with other housing associations in the provision of social housing in North Belfast.

As with everything, if you get a lot of people in one room, they have a list of demands. The issue and the opportunity for us is whether we can explore the local development plans (LDPs) coming from the councils. That will be the biggest change in planning policy for probably a generation, but there may be opportunities through that. Percentage limits were put on people buying a home, whereby a percentage of those homes could be social and vice versa. However, there are opportunities for what private developers and housing associations can do under the LDP.

I know that councils do not have development powers — those powers were removed over 50 years ago — but I would like the Department to explore what can be done with local government, with all the equality protections that are there with the common selection scheme. To be frank, we are running out of land and road in North Belfast. There are three and four generations now living under one roof, and it is horrible. It is horrible for the kids, and it is horrible for the families.

I know that the Minister's officials will say something different about this. It is not that they are disagreeable — I have had this out with them, and they disagree — but housing associations tell me that the amendment of article 15 of the Housing Order 1992 prevents them from building homes for sale. They are saying that, if they could build homes for sale within their envelope of providing social houses, they could put that back in and that could be used for a bigger pot.

Some can borrow additional money, but it always comes back to a lack of land, so, even if they had the money, housing associations are not getting enough land. We therefore may need to look at vesting. I ask the Minister and his officials not so much to look at vesting, because it is always a last resort, but to have discussions with Belfast City Council and Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council

and with other councils on the outskirts of North Belfast, or with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, to see what else we can do.

4.00 pm

I declare an interest. When I was Minister for Communities, I put this in my housing statement of November 2020. We looked at potentially ring-fencing areas of highest need. We did so to try to build homes in order to reduce homelessness. It is not an artificial way of doing so, because it works. Doing that had been removed by the SDLP Minister in 2010 and 2011.

Minister, if you can, I also want you to look at different ways in which we can try to relieve homelessness. It may mean holding a summit or pooling the best brains to look at what we can do. I do not want anyone to be trotting up to the courts to try to get a judicial review of why people have been on the housing waiting list for four years. Legally, anyone would be perfectly entitled to do that. If the Executive were to go to court, however, and say, "I hear what you are saying, but there is nothing that we can do", that is not something that any of us wants on our watch. I will leave it there.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you for opening the debate. All other Members who are called to speak will have seven minutes.

Mr Brett: I pay tribute to the Member for securing this important debate. Housing is very close to my heart and to that of all colleagues who represent North Belfast.

It is worth putting on record the lack of turnout at the debate from certain political quarters. No doubt they will be on Facebook at other times saying how they and their representatives are fighting the housing cause in North Belfast, yet when they have the opportunity to stand up in the House and fight for the people who elected us, their absence is notable. Rather than fight for people as representatives in this place, Facebook seems to be the way to go for them.

In May 2022, I unashamedly stood for election in North Belfast on the slogan of "Building back North Belfast" to end the years of dereliction and demolition and to rebuild, regenerate and once again regrow that proud community. What we have seen in recent months is to be welcomed. We have a record number of new social housing schemes, either on-site or now on-programme, but that cannot be the limit of our ambition. What it must be is the baseline for what all representatives for North Belfast want

to see, which is access to good-quality, affordable housing for every single person in the constituency, regardless of the community in which they live.

My office — like every other in North Belfast, I am sure — is inundated day and daily with families who are at their wits' end. Children are forced to live in living rooms on their grandparents' sofas. There are three or four generations of a family in one house. Most disgracefully, we have communities and families being exploited by ruthless landlords. As Carál Ní Chuilín made very clear, we have some private landlord accommodation in an absolutely disgraceful condition across North Belfast, but that accommodation is the only option that a family has. A family will fear reporting a private landlord to the council in order to get environmental health improvements made to the property, because they know what will happen, which is that they will simply get their eviction notice. Another family will be moved into the property, and that family will then have nowhere to go.

The daily picture in my office, as I have said, is one of three and four generations of a family living in one household. There are people living in rental accommodation that is beyond unacceptable. Unfortunately, when people, particularly single males, come to our offices, we simply have to say to them, "You have no chance of getting a social house allocated to you in North Belfast". That is simply not what we, as elected representatives, want to say to our people. What we cannot do, however, is build up their expectations or hold wrong views that the situation is going to change without there being an intensive investment programme. That is the simple reality that all elected representatives in North Belfast are having to tell people. Young people do not have the option of staying in their homes. Proud communities are being broken up, and people are being forced to move to other parts of the city or to neighbouring boroughs.

For me, the Department for Communities is the most important Department in the Executive. That was why I was so delighted that our party chose that Department, because the work that we can do there to change lives and families is unparalleled. Be it the Rathcoole, Oldpark, Glengormley or Ligonel areas, on the Shore Road or in the New Lodge, the issues faced by every person are exactly the same. All they want is to have good-quality, affordable and secure housing for their families. As a modern society, how can we deny them those basic requirements? That is why all of us who represent North Belfast speak with one voice, I

think, on this issue. We want to see proper investment in social and affordable housing throughout the constituency.

It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to what I call my second family in North Belfast: the Housing Executive. Sometimes I think that I speak to its staff more than they get to speak to their own families. I pay tribute to them and recognise the Shankill office, the north Belfast office and the Newtownabbey 1 and Newtownabbey 2 offices, which cover North Belfast. They give the utmost professionalism and dedication to their jobs because they care about the communities in North Belfast and want to see our people accessing the homes that they need and deserve.

The thing that shows that the housing crisis in North Belfast continues to be exacerbated is the points level at which houses are currently being allocated. I remember that, when I was first elected 10 years ago in North Belfast, you could get a house at 80 or 90 points. Now, you are talking about 200 or 220 points, and, for many people, getting to that level is simply impossible. The only route by which people are getting those points is through intimidation points. Those people move in and disrupt communities, and then we have a constant cycle where houses are destroyed and taken out of the social housing stock for many months to be repaired, and the cycle continues. I hope that the Minister will be able to refer to his ongoing review on that issue, because the intimidation points issue simply needs to be looked at.

What follows will be a rare of example of me offering the Minister some advice on how he may be able to sort out some of the housing issues in North Belfast. First, allow the Housing Executive to build houses again in Northern Ireland. North Belfast has eight excellent sites that remain in the Housing Executive's ownership, which, if it had the ability to build houses itself, would go some way to meeting the housing demand in North Belfast. Secondly, continue to extend the building successful communities programme, which has been a success in lower Oldpark and in the Gainsborough/Mountcollyer area, and other parts of North Belfast would benefit from that. Thirdly, the tower block strategy should be abandoned by the Minister. How can we go about telling people that we have a housing crisis in North Belfast but that we are going to knock down 50 or 60 houses at one site without being able to replace them? In my view, that is not acceptable. Before I was elected to the Assembly, I served as a non-executive member of the Housing Executive board, and I made it

clear that such an action would simply exacerbate the housing crisis. I hope that the Minister will continue to recognise that tower blocks have an important role to play in North Belfast and that they should be invested in and made to be family homes for the people of North Belfast, who deserve to continue to live in their communities.

Miss McAllister: I thank Carál Ní Chuilín for securing this Adjournment debate, and I welcome the Minister to the debate. It is my first Adjournment debate since being elected as an MLA, so I am really glad that it is on housing in North Belfast. I hope that the Minister will forgive me if I sometimes stray into issues that might be thought to be unrelated to housing but that I think exacerbate the issue in North Belfast. I will touch on some of the points that have already been made rather than repeating everything.

We have seen managed student accommodation in North Belfast, particularly with the migration of Ulster University to the city centre and the north Belfast area. It is important to note, however, that residents there have been more content than those in other areas of Belfast in which there is managed student accommodation. I place on the record that it is better to have that managed accommodation, but we also need to have balance. That also brings in the issue about land that was previously earmarked for housing, which the first Member to speak mentioned. Where we differ in opinion is on the issue of shared housing. By "shared housing", I do not just mean housing for those from different backgrounds; I mean shared housing in its totality — private, public, commercial etc. We cannot simply continue to build housing in areas where land is cheapest and where there is nothing else around for the people who are eventually put into those houses. We need to build houses in areas that can become communities so that people can take pride in their areas.

I commend housing associations for their work over the past decade in building new housing, particularly in the Limestone Road area. The houses built there by Newington Housing Association were of fantastic quality, and the residents were exceptionally happy with them. Equally, it is important to note that the Housing Executive is again building houses in North Belfast, along the Ballysillan Road. It is great to see houses being built there again; it is just unfortunate that the number is in single digits. I do not doubt that, when it comes to allocating those houses, it will be chaotic for the Housing Executive, because there are so few houses

and so many people who deserve to have a house in that area.

I want to touch on the reform of the allocation points. I agree that we need to reform the system to ensure that it is fair. I do not doubt that every Member is in the same boat as I am in my constituency office with housing issues, which are the most stressful, accounting for the highest volume of cases. I have a family in North Belfast who have over 210 points, but, because of the type of house that they need due to having children with special needs, they have been left homeless for over four years. At one point, they were moved into temporary accommodation, which is yet another issue. Temporary accommodation for families is often far outside North Belfast. We have families who can no longer send their children to school because their temporary accommodation is out by the airport, for example, and the school is in inner-city North Belfast. That is not acceptable. I understand that there is not enough housing, but it simply cannot go on any longer. We also need to address the reasons why people are in housing crisis. We, ultimately, need the anti-poverty strategy and to address poverty in its entirety.

The issue of derelict buildings was addressed by the previous Member to speak, and Carál raised the vesting issue. It is important that the Communities Minister works with the AERA Minister to look at what we can do about derelict and dilapidated buildings. There is no doubt that the Housing Executive could use every single one of them — it could upgrade them and put families in them. I hope that we can progress that issue, too.

Tower blocks were mentioned. My view differs from that of the previous Member to speak in that I do not think it is acceptable for families to be placed in tower blocks without access to community space. I agree that there needs to be a balance struck between what people want and what they prioritise, because, in North Belfast, we have more urban city living. We need to ensure that there is a balance, as with everything else.

I would like to touch on the crisis in maintenance work in North Belfast, which has not been mentioned. The Housing Executive is so overwhelmed that we are getting into a situation where — this is not just because of COVID, so it cannot be the excuse any longer — the maintenance of Housing Executive houses at the current level is not acceptable. People in their 80s who live in Housing Executive houses are having to rely on their children going to MLAs to try to get the work on

their homes sped up. We are talking about people being left in the cold. We are also talking about family members whose asthma has worsened, for example, because of the mould that is growing in their Housing Executive property. We need to ensure that there is a review of all existing Housing Executive stock so that there are proper standards when it comes to damp and insulation.

I understand that the Housing Executive is working to address the maintenance backlog. However, if there was anything else that the Minister could do, such as putting his weight behind the call for more funding and allocations, so that the Housing Executive could speed that up, I know that many families in North Belfast would appreciate it, because, in the current situation, some are physically unable to use rooms in their homes, and such help would mean that they could remain in their homes.

4.15 pm

I understand that this has been an issue since long before the current Minister's time in office, and it will take some time to assess and fix completely. However, every person on the housing waiting list is a person in need and in crisis. I hope that, because the matter has been brought to the Chamber today, the Minister will realise that it is on the agenda and is a priority of every MLA in North Belfast. Hopefully, we can progress housing and anti-poverty issues so that we can see more housing relief in North Belfast. I thank the Member for securing the Adjournment debate, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr Kelly: I think that we are going to come to an agreement on the issue. I do not want to go over it all again, as the previous three Members to speak articulated it very well. I will emphasise a few of the issues, because they have been comprehensively covered, particularly the points system. That will be reviewed, but there needs to be a good consultation on that. There have been attempts to change the intimidation points system for quite a while, because it has been massively abused.

We know what the problem is. It was described earlier, and statistics were given, but, just to give one again, of 4,409 applications, 3,479 have come from people who are in housing stress, and only 655 homes have been built. I am not here to criticise the work of the Housing Executive and the housing associations; they have been doing good work, but we need to assist them. What can be done, Minister? I thank you for coming to the debate to listen,

Minister. I know that your responsibility goes way beyond North Belfast, but we are talking about North Belfast. Of course, North Belfast is in the top four areas of need, along with west Belfast, Newry and Mourne, and Foyle.

Forgive me if I am repeating comments that have been made, but I think that some work was possibly done on the public land that the Department owns before you stepped into the role. I ask you to check that, because work that we can build on may already have been done. One of the big issues is the amount of land that there is for building in North Belfast in order to meet the current demand. There is also council-owned land to consider. Article 15 of the Housing Order has been mentioned, but we could look at amending it in order to make the process easier. At the moment, under the Belfast development plan, there is an aim to have 20% social and affordable housing. That figure is way too low. We need to increase that to give a fair amount of flexibility, which could make a big difference to what we are dealing with. I agree that there are different types of housing tenure, and we have looked at the different aspects of that. However, social and affordable housing is the area where the stress is most felt.

We should mention equality in the context of all that. In the past, we have had discussions about discrimination, where we have nearly said, "This is discrimination", and "That is discrimination". I think that if equality is built into the process, it affects people across the board. I am not just standing here as a republican or a nationalist talking about a particular area of North Belfast, but we should make equality central to that process to make sure that there is no discrimination, on whatever basis that might be. Maybe the Minister could also look at that, because we need to eliminate any type of discrimination.

I want to praise co-ownership, and maybe I need to expand on that. It has allowed people who would never be able to have a mortgage, especially at the moment, to have an opportunity, and it can make a big difference to their life. Carál mentioned a particular example, but there are many examples of the rents that are now being paid, and they are unbelievable. Co-ownership allows people to avoid the huge private rents in those circumstances. However, as I said, the problem goes much wider.

Ring fencing is one of those terms that people use a lot, and then all the Ministers start panicking, because it is very hard to get ring fencing. The type of ring fencing that we are talking about, however, is for the areas where

there is the most need. If there is a budget, another thing that might be looked at is the ring-fencing of part of the budget for that. The whole thing, of course, is to have a budget with which to build houses and reduce housing stress. That is what this whole conversation is about.

A number of things were mentioned. One thing that comes up time and again and which never seems to go anywhere is vesting. Vesting is quite a hard negotiation — it normally involves negotiation — but it goes back to the fact that we have public land and are looking at what way to use it. Alongside that, I think that it was Nuala who mentioned the idea of this also being about refurbishment and maintenance. Examples have been given by other MLAs, and there will be more. Housing is the biggest issue that comes into my office, but there are also the issues of maintenance.

I am not attacking every landlord, but, when you start to deal with landlords, you see that there are some landlords with private properties in which there are young children and there is mould on the wall. I have been in and out of houses, flats and all that and have seen that. You see people trying to paint over that mould, and then you go back in six months to a year and see that the problem is still there. Accountability is something else to look at.

Downsizing: I say that as a person of my age. A lot of people want to downsize when everybody has flown the nest, and they go to the Housing Executive and say that they want to downsize. It is about giving attention to the appropriate place for them to downsize to. Going back a bit in history, it used to appal me that, when there were problem tenants around interface areas, there was a habit of moving them out of somewhere that they should have been moved out of, but of then concentrating them. Many a time, you landed in some interface area and, although you did not know how it started, found that there was a drink house and all of that.

For those people who are shifting down in size, it is about looking at the appropriateness of where they shift to. I think that it works on the basis that the Housing Executive does not approach them; they approach the Housing Executive. If you like, they are trying to do something to help the housing situation, so maybe a wee bit of extra thought should be given to where they might move to. Thought should be given to them going to an over-55s housing project, because that is what they are looking for.

I will finish off by talking about the tower blocks, which were mentioned. Around the blocks in

New Lodge, after Grenfell, there were quite a number of moves to do with the danger there.

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

Mr Kelly: I will indeed.

It is about keeping an eye on that. This is the last thing. I mentioned Grenfell. I do not know whether this is within the Minister's bailiwick, but there is a debate because of the Victoria Square apartments. Six years is clearly not long enough when it comes to accountability for buildings. We need to look at that.

Mr Kingston: I welcome the debate, as others have done, and thank the Member for securing the debate on housing in North Belfast. I think that all five MLAs from North Belfast agree that this is the number-one issue that they deal with in the number of requests that come into their constituency offices. Those come from people who are seeking for us to help to push their case for social housing or who require repairs to social housing, as well as from people in private tenancies — a bit more work is needed, through the council, to make improvements to those properties — or from people who are being threatened with eviction and are in crisis. There is also the ongoing work that we all do to try to see derelict and housing opportunity sites developed. It typically takes years of work to bring a successful outcome in those cases.

Closely associated with that housing work is the work on the environment: alleyways, areas where there has been dumping and areas that are not being well maintained, where proper maintenance may not have been planned from the start.

First, the good news is that demand in North Belfast is increasing. That is good. It would be good, though, if that resulted in more social housing sites being brought forward. A frustration that we have is that, where that demand increases, we do not see the increase in the number of sites. That means that more people are frustrated and disappointed and asking us to lobby for them to help them to get social housing. I can remember the times when people could get a social house in greater Shankill or North Belfast with fewer than 50 points. Now, typically, you would need 150-plus to have any chance. As I said, we are constantly working with the Housing Executive, the Department, housing associations and private developers to see those sites brought forward. There are always complications along the way, but that work continues.

Yesterday's debate about water infrastructure was obviously very relevant to this. It is usually one of the main stumbling hurdles, with developers being told they have to build extra pipework to make the connections to the storm drains or the sewerage system and to keep the two systems separate, which is adding six-figure sums on to developments and making some small developments unviable. This issue will not go away for us, as an Assembly. We will have to address the need to invest in the waste water system and find a way to fund it to address the problem.

The Minister may be aware that, in the greater Shankill area, a lobby group has set up the BUILD project, which has mapped the number of derelict and housing opportunity sites, as I call them, in that area. Over 70 viable sites have been developed, some in private ownership and some in statutory ownership, with the Department for Communities, the Education Authority or other Government bodies. My colleagues and I have been working with the BUILD group to push for statutory bodies to meet, at a senior level, the Housing Executive, the Department for Communities and Belfast City Council and asking for a coordinated strategic plan to bring forward those sites. I sometimes hear of other areas where residents and communities are opposing social housing, but that is certainly not the experience in North Belfast. People want to see developments taking place, and we urge the Department to work where there is that willingness and see sites brought forward.

I agree with the comments about co-ownership. We have seen private developments where, in some areas, the market was not strong and developers were sitting on their land. We are now seeing sites moving forward and, in some of those areas, maybe a third of the houses are being sold through co-ownership. I agree that it provides a path into home ownership for people for whom, otherwise, the level of deposit or the mortgage interest rates would be prohibitive. I am a very strong supporter of the co-ownership scheme, and it is making that path possible for people.

I want to mention a particular area with opportunity sites, which is Glencairn. With the Forthriver ward now moving into North Belfast, it certainly has opportunity sites and is very much in need of a village plan. As the Minister may know, through Belfast City Council, we have most of the funding needed for a community facility at the heart of Glencairn. There is a need for remaining funding to cover the cost of that, but the area is crying out for a

proper village plan and it has the opportunity sites within it to make that viable.

I also want to speak positively, as my colleague did, about the building successful communities programme, which was an initiative of a former Minister from my party who recognised that always waiting for the waiting lists to grow in certain areas to justify a development was a negative cycle and that there was a need to break that by putting some new housing into an area. It has been very successful in lower Shankill and Tigers Bay, and it also operated in lower Oldpark. The actual work in lower Shankill is continuing. As well as housing, there have been other developments with the new walkway and improvements to some publicly and privately owned sites with clawbacks in place. It has made a significant difference in those disadvantaged areas.

My colleague mentioned the Housing Executive staff. They work hard, and we need the vacancies in those public-facing positions to be filled.

4.30 pm

In North Belfast, we have a number of interfaces. In places, it is like a patchwork quilt. Some people almost try to deny that there are issues there, but there are, and, even though there has been a great improvement in those areas, things can flare up, so those issues need to be managed well.

I thank the Minister for his attendance today. I thank the Member opposite for securing the Adjournment debate, and I look forward to the Minister's contribution.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): That completes the list of Members who wished to speak. I call the Minister to respond. The Minister has 10 minutes.

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for securing the debate, and I welcome the opportunity to respond to it. This is the first Adjournment debate for a number of Members, and it is the first time other than at Question Time that I have spoken in this place as Communities Minister. I am really pleased that we have the opportunity to talk about this matter, because I recognise many of the issues and concerns that the Member and others have raised about housing in North Belfast. The reality, of course, is that many of the issues are replicated throughout the country, but I

recognise that they are particularly acute in North Belfast.

The issues are many: the demand for social homes and the increase in waiting lists; the availability and cost of private rented homes; growing homelessness pressures; the difficulty of delivering the necessary infrastructure and finding suitable land to provide new homes; and ensuring the quality and safety of existing homes. As the Minister with responsibility for housing, I know that those issues and concerns are not faced in just one constituency: they exist in our cities and towns, urban and rural, and the need and demand for good, affordable and sustainable homes is currently not being met. Housing in all places is a priority for me, and it should be a priority across the Executive. For that reason, housing must be considered as a whole system, and there must be a collective commitment and action across government, alongside private-sector and community and voluntary sector partners.

The barriers are well rehearsed. Right now, thousands of homes are not being built because of limitations on water infrastructure. Getting suitable land can be difficult. The planning process can significantly impact on delivery. As a result, thousands of people struggle to find a suitable home, and that problem, unfortunately, is only getting worse. We cannot end up like Dublin or London, where the failures of housing supply mean that economic growth benefits only the property-owning few and where people with good jobs struggle to put a roof over their head, never mind buy their own home.

Removing those barriers requires coordinated action and investment across the Executive; otherwise, they will only squeeze housing supply further. The Executive have to deliver. That means focusing on what is important, and that includes providing homes for our people. The whole-system approach is fundamental to the draft housing supply strategy on which I am working. It will provide the framework to bring about the system changes that we need. I will prioritise putting that much-needed strategy in place. We have to be clear, however, that it will work only if we have buy-in from other Departments that prioritises the changes that we need to make in order to deliver the homes that we need.

My second priority is to deliver more social homes. We need more social housing. The year before last, we started 1,950 homes. In the past financial year, over 1,500 homes were started in partnership with the Housing Executive and housing associations. I am pleased that the

target was met, but 1,500 homes is not enough. We need to protect the social homes that we have and start about 2,500 houses a year. I commit now to keep building more homes where they are needed. Despite all the other financial pressures, I will continue to spend most of my capital budget on new social homes. I want us to be in a position to build 35,000 more homes over the next 15 years. Over the next few years, I will put the foundations of that ambitious programme in place, working to increase the rate at which we build homes. The commitment to social home delivery can be seen in North Belfast, where, over the next three years, 809 social housing units are programmed to start under the social housing development programme.

My third priority is to take action to protect the Housing Executive so that it can continue to provide decent homes for our households and families. Sometimes, I think that the issue has been talked about for so long that people forget how important it is, or maybe the numbers seem so big or the Housing Executive seems such an integral part of our lives that we cannot get our heads around the real danger that it might fail. Given the current state of its homes and rental income, the Housing Executive has warned that some of its homes might become unfit for people to live in. We cannot accept a decline in the quality and quantity of our social housing. That would be catastrophic for our communities and our towns and cities, but, most importantly, it would be catastrophic for tens of thousands of people who will never be able to get a social home. I want to prioritise finding a solution that will place the Housing Executive on a sustainable financial footing, and getting that done is really important for me. It will enable additional, much-needed investment to improve the quality and enhance the energy efficiency of the Housing Executive's homes. An example of driving such innovation forward can be seen already in North Belfast, where, as part of a pilot, the Housing Executive is building six semi-detached homes at Sunningdale Gardens. They will really help in terms of lower heating bills, savings from reduced fuel costs and more comfortable homes.

The next issue that I want to address is improving the response to homelessness. That sector is under significant strain, manifested by the rapid increase in the need for temporary accommodation. I want to make sure that homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurrent. I want to support a shift to prevention, but we have an immediate issue with the use of temporary accommodation. That is money not being spent on homelessness prevention or

supported housing schemes. Staying in insecure temporary accommodation is not good enough for families and puts them, especially children, under huge strain and pressure. It will take time to achieve these ambitions, so our short-term focus must be on continuing to support those currently in crisis.

I want to mention the Supporting People scheme. High-quality, effective housing support can make a real difference to people's lives and enable them to live more independently in the community. I have been out and about and have seen fantastic examples of the difference that that support can make in people's lives. That is why I made the decision last month to approve an additional £3 million in funding for the programme for the financial year. That additional funding is an acknowledgement of the need that exists in our society.

In the couple of minutes that I have left, I will turn to some of the comments that Members have made. First of all, Ms Ní Chuilín asked me to be the advocate for housing need, and I hope that I have, to some extent, demonstrated that I understand and am determined to resolve some of the issues to make sure that we do not find ourselves in the position that others do. She highlighted clearly the situation that we find ourselves in, with a demand for 4,400 homes in the last financial year but only 655 new homes built. She is absolutely right to highlight the fact that local development plans will play an important part, but it is essential that we take a whole-of-government and a holistic approach to the issue to make sure that, essentially, we make it easier for people to get the land and build new homes on that land.

Mr Brett talked about ambition, and it is really important that we are ambitious in this area because the demand and the need is so great. He also raised the issue of the parties that are absent today. I will not go into that in too much detail other than to say that it is surprising that so many parties have not turned up to take part in the debate, which is so important, not just for this constituency but across Northern Ireland. I agree with what he said about intimidation points and the need for that system to be reviewed. I will receive the report and research on that, and I have great sympathy with the points that he made. He raised issues in relation to tower blocks as well. When we have such housing need, it does not make sense for us to remove so many potential homes for people if we are not in a position to replace them. Therefore, we will, of course, consider that issue.

Miss McAllister was absolutely right to raise the anti-poverty strategy; it is an important issue. The issues that she raised around derelict buildings will be part of the overall housing supply strategy. We have to make sure that we can build new homes but that we also look at the homes that are in existence and bring them up to an appropriate standard.

Mr Kelly talked about identifying land. We are looking at land that the Department holds, as well as other public land, so that we can make the most of it. He mentioned co-ownership, and one of the first things that I did was raise the co-ownership limit in Northern Ireland. I will have more to say in the coming days on the building safety issues that he raised.

I agree with a number of the comments that Mr Kingston made, which others raised as well. It is important that we see more social housing sites being brought forward so that we can make sure that we are addressing the issue by having the land and making sure that we are able to build on it.

I am committed to a genuinely ambitious and strategic programme of work that will deliver results for people. I will need support from Executive colleagues in order to do that. I am not here to tinker around the edges. I want to see thousands more affordable homes being built and lived in over the next three years, and I hope that I will have the support of other parties to do that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Minister, thank you for that response, and thank you, Members.

Adjourned at 4.41 pm.