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Contents

Matter of the Day

Paris Olympics and Paralympics	1
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Members' Statements

Dynamic Pricing	6
Winter Fuel Payments	6
Larne Football Club	7
Veterans Commissioner for Northern Ireland	7
Men's Action Network	7
Warrenpoint: Refuse-derived Fuel Odour	8
Emergency Services Day	8
Church of the Holy Name, Greenisland: Fire	9
Lá Idirnáisiúnta chun an tOideachas a Chosaint ar an lonsaí	9
International Day to Protect Education from Attack	9
Newtownards: Second World War Bomb	10
Grenfell Inquiry	10
Voting Age	11
Assembly Business	
Committee Membership	12
Committee Membership	12
Committee Membership	12
Ministerial Statement	
Programme for Government: Public Consultation	13
Oral Answers to Questions	
The Executive Office	25
Justice	34
Executive Committee Business	
Budget (No. 2) Bill: Consideration Stage	44
Private Members' Business	
Policing Resources	45
Assembly Business	
Standing Order 10(3A): Extension of Sitting	65
Private Members' Business	
EU Funding for the Community and Voluntary Sector	66

Assembly Members

Aiken, Steve (South Antrim)
Allen, Andy (East Belfast)
Archibald, Dr Caoimhe (East Londonderry)
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)
Baker, Danny (West Belfast)
Beattie, Doug (Upper Bann)
Blair, John (South Antrim)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)
Brett, Phillip (North Belfast)
Brogan, Miss Nicola (West Tyrone)
Brooks, David (East Belfast)
Brownlee, Ms Cheryl (East Antrim)
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)
Buchanan, Tom (West Tyrone)
Buckley, Jonathan (Upper Bann)
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)
Chambers, Alan (North Down)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)
Crawford, Colin (North Antrim)
Delargy, Pádraig (Foyle)
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)
Dillon, Mrs Linda (Mid Ulster)
Dodds, Mrs Diane (Upper Bann)
Dolan, Miss Jemma (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Donnelly, Danny (East Antrim)
Dunne, Stephen (North Down)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)
Egan, Ms Connie (North Down)
Elliott, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Ennis, Mrs Sinéad (South Down)
Erskine, Mrs Deborah (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Ferguson, Mrs Ciara (Foyle)
Flynn, Miss Órlaithí (West Belfast)
Forsythe, Ms Diane (South Down)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)
Gaston, Timothy (North Antrim)
Gildernew, Colm (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)
Guy, Mrs Michelle (Lagan Valley)
Hargey, Miss Deirdre (South Belfast)
Harvey, Harry (Strangford)
Honeyford, David (Lagan Valley)
Hunter, Ms Cara (East Londonderry)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)
Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Kimmins, Ms Liz (Newry and Armagh)
Kingston, Brian (North Belfast)
Little-Pengelly, Mrs Emma (Lagan Valley)
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
McAllister, Miss Nuala (North Belfast)
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
McGrath, Colin (South Down)
McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)
McHugh, Maolíosá (West Tyrone)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
McLaughlin, Ms Sinéad (Foyle)
McMurray, Andrew (South Down)
McNulty, Justin (Newry and Armagh)
McReynolds, Peter (East Belfast)
Martin, Peter (North Down)
Mason, Mrs Cathy (South Down)
Mathison, Nick (Strangford)
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)
Muir, Andrew (North Down)
Mulholland, Ms Sian (North Antrim)
Murphy, Miss Áine (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
Nicholl, Ms Kate (South Belfast)
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
O'Neill, Ms Michelle (Mid Ulster)
O'Toole, Matthew (South Belfast)
Poots, Edwin (Speaker)
Reilly, Ms Aisling (West Belfast)
Robinson, Alan (East Londonderry)
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)
Stewart, John (East Antrim)
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)
Tennyson, Eóin (Upper Bann)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 9 September 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Paris Olympics and Paralympics

Mr Speaker: Claire Sugden has been given leave to make a statement on Northern Ireland athletes at the Paris Olympics and Paralympics, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should indicate that by rising in their place and continuing to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind you that there will be no interventions or points of order during this item of business.

Ms Sugden: This is the first opportunity for the House to acknowledge and congratulate the success of athletes from Northern Ireland at the Paris Olympic Games 2024. Their performances not only brought immense pride to our region but inspired a generation of young athletes across the United Kingdom and Ireland. Northern Ireland, as a small part of these islands, has once again demonstrated that size is no barrier to greatness. The achievements of our athletes reflect not only their hard work, dedication and talent but the resilience, passion and spirit that characterise the people of Northern Ireland.

All Olympians and Paralympians from Northern Ireland, representing either Team GB and Northern Ireland or Team Ireland, should be incredibly proud of their achievements. They represent the Northern Ireland born from the Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland in which I want to live and raise my children. Yet again, Northern Ireland has proven itself on the world stage. Prior to the games, only three athletes from Northern Ireland had ever won an Olympic medal, including our forever golden girl and lifetime ambassador, Lady Mary Peters, in 1972. However, this summer, four golds, one silver and two bronze have come home. Seven medals demonstrate the talent that exists here, but also the strong belief in the ability of our young people, from their coaches and local

clubs, to be the best in the world. As a Government — as a Parliament — we must advocate, nurture and adequately fund sport in Northern Ireland so that more talent finds its rightful place on the world stage.

Let us all in the House join in congratulating our Olympic heroes: Daniel Wiffen, Jack McMillan, Hannah Scott, Rhys McClenaghan, Rebecca Shorten and Philip Doyle. They are inspirational young people who will be lifelong ambassadors for Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom and Ireland. I make special mention of Hannah Scott.

I have known Hannah and her family for a number of years. I have watched as she has grown within the nurturing environment of Bann Rowing Club. She has brought the fourth medal home to that club and to Coleraine. It was an absolute delight to see the people of Coleraine gather in the town centre to cheer Hannah on. It was a nail-biting finish, and we all screamed and cheered when she got over that line. She put in a performance that was second to none and had everyone on the edge of their seat.

I look forward to supporting these athletes as they continue on their sporting journeys, and I eagerly anticipate greater success for them and for other Northern Ireland athletes in the years to come.

Miss Reilly: I thank the Member for bringing this matter to the House today. Our Olympic and Paralympic athletes serve as powerful role models who embody not only resilience but determination and excellence. Their achievements transcend sport and show people of all abilities that greatness is defined not by limitations but by perseverance and heart. By showcasing their incredible feats, they not only inspire future generations to push past barriers but change perceptions of disability on a global scale. The legacy that they will leave after these games is one of hope, demonstrating that, with the right mindset, anything is possible. Seeing these athletes compete over the past couple of weeks and months will foster inclusion and empower individuals to pursue their dreams,

regardless of any obstacles that they face. The years of training, dedication and sacrifice, for not only the athletes but their families, to get to that stage is truly immense.

I know that preparation for LA in 2028 is under way. As public representatives, we should strive for the investment in our local sporting facilities and infrastructure that our communities deserve, because we have to ensure the continued success of our local sporting heroes on the world stage. I congratulate all the athletes and wish them the very best. Along with your clubs, your families and your coaches, we all support you. We are all behind you, and we are very proud of your achievements. *Ádh mór libh uilig. [Translation: Good luck to you all.]*

Mr Kingston: It is an honour to congratulate all those from Northern Ireland who represented us with great success at the Paris Olympics and Paralympics. Their success was at a level that we have never seen before. Prior to the games, just three athletes from Northern Ireland had ever won a gold medal, yet, this time, in one Olympic Games, we had four gold medal winners: Rhys McClenaghan, Hannah Scott, Jack McMillan and Daniel Wiffen. There was also a silver medal for Rebecca Shorten, and two bronze medals for Daniel Wiffen and Philip Doyle. Indeed, Hannah Scott, at the age of 25, became the first woman from Northern Ireland to win an Olympic gold since our golden girl, Lady Mary Peters, in 1972. The athletes' success has filled us all with great pride. It is to their credit and that of their coaches and families and those who have supported them in sports clubs, with many sacrifices made over many years.

Nine athletes and two guides from Northern Ireland participated across six sports in the Paralympic Games. Londonderry twins Chloe and Judith MacCombe completed their triathlon event, finishing sixth and eighth respectively. Last week, Deaten Registe from Dungannon finished sixth in his first Paralympic final, the SB14 100 metres breaststroke, with a personal best of 1:07:82. We congratulate them. They have made us proud this summer. We have never had this level of success, and the Assembly is united in saying, "Well done. You have done Northern Ireland proud".

Mr Mathison: I thank the Member for bringing this Matter of the Day to the Floor. It is absolutely appropriate that we should start our business today by paying tribute to our athletes and their achievements in the Olympics and Paralympics. Members have already listed how

successful our athletes from across Northern Ireland were in those events.

I reference in particular how proud I was to see the achievements of Newtownards athlete, Rhys McClenaghan, who won gold on the pommel horse in such spectacular fashion. Speaking afterwards, Rhys referred to it as the culmination of a 10-year plan. It was 10 years of work from his youth when a coach picked up on his talent and believed in him, and the two of them were prepared to put that work in to culminate in that achievement. It was truly inspirational. Gathering in Newtownards after the success, people of all ages came together to celebrate. I must say that it was one of the most positive evenings that we have ever seen in the town, and I look forward to seeing what Rhys achieves in the years to come.

I also pay tribute to his coach, Luke, who believed in Rhys and put the work in with him. He has also committed to making the leisure centre in the town of Newtownards a centre of excellence for gymnastics, as well as an open and accessible space for aspiring gymnasts of all ages to come and learn from a gold medal winner.

We were very sad that Portaferry's own Ciara Mageean was not able to compete in the games due to injury. I have no doubt that had she competed, we would have been celebrating her success with medals coming home as well. We wish her all the very best for her recovery and hope to see her in four years' time bringing medals back to Strangford again.

Mr Allen: I welcome the opportunity to celebrate the remarkable achievements of Northern Ireland athletes at the 2024 Olympics and Paralympics. Our athletes have once again proven that Northern Ireland, although small in size, is mighty in spirit and determination. The relentless dedication, discipline and unwavering commitment has shone brightly on the world stage, inspiring us all. The games have been a celebration of their successes and a testament to the power of community and teamwork. Behind every medal, personal best and triumph is a story of resilience, hard work and a strong support system that has fuelled the journey of our athletes.

We must continue championing our athletes as they build on those successes and pave the way for the next generation. Their achievements remind us that, with determination, anything is possible. Northern Ireland stands tall, proud and ready for even greater victories to come. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I extend our best wishes

for their successes as we follow them from here onward.

Mr McNulty: Citius, Altius, Fortius — Communiter: Faster, higher, stronger — together. Wow, the success of our Olympians in Paris has been nothing short of extraordinary. The passion, grit, determination and conviction of our local competitors has been matched only by the pride of their families and local communities. It was inspiring to see communities rally behind all our local competitors, irrespective of whether they represented Team Ireland or Team GB. It is vital for all of us in the Chamber today to do more than just join a celebratory chorus. Sporting excellence in our local community is on full display after the record medal haul, and I believe that it is incumbent on us to seize on that momentum and harness those opportunities. That is why I have asked the Communities Minister to engage directly with the Irish Government on how to harness the full potential of their recent announcement of a €400 million investment in sports and infrastructure. Sport can take us all and make us all faster, higher, stronger and bring us together.

With 13 medals having made their way back to the island of Ireland, it is abundantly clear that we, as a people, punch well above our weight on the international stage. I commend the Minister on having a joint ceremony here for the Paralympians and Olympians, which would be a wonderful festival of sport in this place. The best way that the Assembly can celebrate the success of our Paris Olympians is to lay the foundation of success for future generations who have been inspired by the success of our local champions.

I will give an honourable call-out to our Armagh man Daniel Wiffen and the joy that he brought on top of the orange pride that we already experienced with the All-Ireland success.

12.15 pm

Mr Harvey: The Paris Olympics 2024 will go down in history for Northern Ireland, with 41 athletes competing — 10 from the Strangford constituency. We congratulate all who participated in the games, particularly the seven who brought home medals: four gold, two silver and a bronze.

This afternoon, I especially congratulate Rhys McClenaghan from Newtownards on his outstanding performance in Paris, winning a gold medal in the pommel horse event. That is

an amazing achievement for this young man. He has faced disappointments throughout his career, but his determination allowed him to realise his dream this summer. Rhys is now recognised as one of the pommel horse specialists of his generation. Ards and North Down Borough Council organised a fabulous afternoon and evening in Conway Square, where Rhys and fellow medallist Jack McMillan from Bangor arrived in style in a 1965 Ford Mustang convertible. They were welcomed back to the borough by phenomenal crowds of well-wishers. The local people enjoyed being able to personally congratulate Rhys on his success, and he stated afterwards that he was overwhelmed by the support from the people of Newtownards.

I also congratulate all those from Northern Ireland who took part in the Paralympics, and especially Barry McClements, who is also from Newtownards, on his outstanding performance in the pool. What an achievement for Newtownards and the Strangford constituency, with those outstanding athletes representing them in world-class sporting events and setting an example for other young people to reach for their dreams and work hard to achieve them.

Ms Armstrong: As the third Strangford MLA to speak, I too congratulate all our Olympians and Paralympians, particularly Rhys McClenaghan and Barry McClements. They have done the area so proud. I remember watching the television when Rhys was waiting to find out, after the last person had used the pommel horse, whether he had won his gold medal. I was in tears along with him. Congratulations, Rhys. For those who are not involved in sport to see him achieve something that is so amazing is fantastic.

We always talk about the Olympians. As someone who is so invested in disability, I pay tribute to our Paralympians. I recognise Claire Taggart in boccia — what a match. We had Barry McClements, Dearbhaile Brady and Deaten Registe swimming in Paris. In the paratriathlon, we had Chloe and Judith MacCombe, with Catherine Sands and Eimear Nicholls. In wheelchair basketball, we had Katie Morrow — fantastic. In paradressage, we had Jessica McKenna. Finally, we had wheelchair rugby player David Ross. They are an amazing group of Paralympians. I cannot wait to see them when they come to the House and celebrate with the Minister for Communities.

Speaking of communities, I think that now is the time, as others have said, when we need to look at investment in grassroots sports, so that the young people who are coming forward, who

are looking at Rhys, Barry, Eimear and all those athletes, think, "I can do that too. I could be at the next Olympics or Paralympics, like they have been". Investment in grassroots sport to help people to become premier in their sporting field would be amazing.

Mr Nesbitt: I have been listening with great interest to the praise — the deserved praise — that is being heaped on our Olympic and Paralympic athletes and their great successes in Paris over the summer, particularly those who have joined our gold medal winners. I note that we are crediting only three previous gold medallists — Lady Mary Peters, and Jimmy Kirkwood and Stephen Martin for hockey — but we have four. We have a fourth. The first was Robin Dixon, who won a gold medal in the two-man bobsleigh event at the Winter Olympics. It is likened to someone winning a gold medal for swimming with no access to a swimming pool. Let us put him on record: Robin Dixon, our first Olympic gold medallist.

Ms Hunter: I, too, rise to congratulate and share my admiration for all those members of Team GB and Team Ireland who have been at the Olympic and Paralympic Games from our shared home place, particularly Hannah Scott from Coleraine and Dearbhaile Brady from Feeny in my constituency.

Dearbhaile made her Paralympic debut in swimming. She is a 16-year-old who is involved in Limavady Amateur Swimming Club. All who won are incredibly inspiring, but those two young women in particular show what can be achieved through hard work, dedication and commitment. They are two incredible women in sport, which is something that I love to see. They are two capable, fierce young ladies of my constituency, and they are truly inspiring. They show that anything is possible if you put your mind to it.

Some of the key points that have echoed around the Chamber today were about the dire need to invest in sport. You will often see online GoFundMe accounts being used to try to get our athletes to events: that is shameful. We should support and endorse them and do all we can to fund them. That will encourage more young people to get into sport.

With regard to rowing in my constituency, I recently spoke with Glen, one of the coaches at the historic Bann Rowing Club, Coleraine. We talked about the importance of sport to young people and of ensuring that every child has equal opportunity to take part in sport. The importance of investment in sport is to ensure

that every child, regardless of background or family income, has every right and opportunity to partake in sporting activities.

I say to our Olympians and Paralympians: thank you so much for going out there and doing us all proud. We have to ensure that we invest in our young people for tomorrow.

Mr Middleton: I join Members across the Chamber and everyone across Northern Ireland in congratulating our Olympians and Paralympians. There is not a place in Northern Ireland has not been touched by the fantastic achievements of our athletes, by the dedication that they have put into their training and by all those involved behind the scenes. Today, however, I make particular mention of the remarkably talented tandem twins from Claudy, para athletes Judith and Chloe MacCombe. I hope that all Members will join me in congratulating those dedicated and talented Northern Irish athletes.

Judith and Chloe come from Claudy. They are fantastic young women who are visually impaired athletes and compete at the top of their game across many competitions, not least, most recently, the Paris Paralympics. The young women were born with a form of albinism, which meant that Chloe and Judith have grown up with visual impairment, but they have proved to be a real inspiration for us all in the north-west and, indeed, across Northern Ireland.

Chloe and Judith were originally pararowers. Later, on being approached by Triathlon Ireland, they became paratriathletes. It seems like nothing can stop Chloe and Judith, and long may that continue. We are so proud of their performances at the Paralympics, with Chloe placing sixth and Judith placing eighth: an incredible achievement for those two local girls.

Chloe and Judith are a perfect example of what our young people can achieve and are achieving. Their hard work and training and their kind and humble natures are things that we can look upon with pride in their achievement. Notably, they always ensure that they witness their Christian faith, putting God first in everything that they do and always giving God the glory.

Dr Aiken: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your indulgence in letting me speak. I apologise for not being in the Chamber for the beginning of the statement.

I thank the great Larne Swimming Club and, in particular, Danielle Hill and Daniel Wiffen for the

impact that they have made in their communities, particularly in swimming and bringing young people towards sport. I declare an interest: my youngest daughter swims with Larne Swimming Club. Although it is in a neighbouring constituency, I am a great supporter of Larne and everything that it tries to do.

The most interesting thing is the enthusiasm that young people now have for sports such as swimming. If they see somebody who is like themselves taking part in any athletic activity, it encourages them to get involved. I was heartened recently when — you will not believe this — I was in the gym with a fellow MLA. The reason I was there was that so many young people were swimming and taking up swimming lessons because they had seen the examples of Danielle Hill and Daniel Wiffen pushing through.

I also thank all the supporters of Larne Swimming Club and all the people who have turned out in order to make sure that those young people are given every support. It is a great success story for Northern Ireland and Ireland and for Team GB and NI, and we should celebrate such things. Mr Speaker, thank you for your indulgence.

Mr Gaston: I thank Claire for tabling the Matter of the Day. We can all celebrate and be proud of the success of Northern Ireland's athletes. To have won only three gold medals in the history of the summer Olympics and then to win four along with a silver and two bronze medals is remarkable. I congratulate all those from Northern Ireland who competed for Team GB or Team Ireland. One hopes that their remarkable success acts as a catalyst to inspire many budding athletes to achieve Olympic glory in the years ahead.

I will, however, highlight an equality issue that comes from the Olympics. In December 2013, an independent working group that the then sports Minister established identified serious issues in boxing and highlighted examples of sectarianism and racism. A key finding of the report was that boxers from Northern Ireland should have the option, under the terms of the Belfast Agreement, of aiming to represent Great Britain at the Olympic Games and other international tournaments. I regret the fact that, 11 years on, no progress has been made on that and that, when it comes to boxing and a number of other sports, no route is open for an athlete to compete under the Union flag on the world's biggest sporting stage. That is a scandal. Something that was identified in a 2013 report should have been dealt with years

ago. As we celebrate our athletes' success, I urge the Minister to do what he can to get belated movement on the issue.

Mr Speaker, if you will indulge me for a moment, I will remind the House that it was because of the courageous stand taken by Sandy Row Boxing Club, which is in your constituency, that those issues came to light. Sadly, as things stand today, the club faces the prospect of ceasing to operate after more than a quarter of a century in the working-class heartland of south Belfast. Again, I urge the Minister to do all that he can on that.

Mr Speaker: Members, that is a positive way to start the new season. Thank you for that.

Members' Statements

Dynamic Pricing

Mr McAleer: I take the opportunity to speak about dynamic pricing. As you know, that is the practice by which the market value of tickets and products rapidly increases with demand. Last Saturday morning, along with thousands of other Oasis fans, I logged on at 7.30 to try to get tickets for the gig. I started at number 58,516 in the queue, and, by 10.30 am, three hours later, I had managed to get to number one. When I thought that it was my moment to get the coveted tickets, I was faced with the choice of — again, this happened not just to me; it happened to thousands of other fans — standing tickets in the range of €420 to €574 or seated tickets going from €542 to €574. A lot of fans here and across the water in Britain are very frustrated. It has left a bad taste in people's mouth. Indeed, the president of my party, Mary Lou McDonald, has called it out, saying that it has had a disproportionate impact on working-class people, who can least afford to pay for such tickets, especially given that the support base for Oasis in Ireland and Britain is mostly in working-class communities.

That unfair practice needs to stop. Consumers need to know the price ranges when an event is advertised, know that they are fixed and know that everyone has a fair chance to buy a ticket. Basically, the practice needs to end. I welcome the fact that the Competitions and Markets Authority (CMA) is investigating dynamic pricing in relation to the Oasis concert. You will all have received correspondence from the CMA in recent days. The investigation is looking at whether unfair commercial practices took place, whether people were given clear and timely information to explain that tickets could be subject to so-called dynamic pricing and whether they felt under pressure to buy tickets at short notice at a higher price than they understood they would be.

As part of the investigation, the CMA invites people who bought or attempted to buy tickets to share their views with it. That could involve sharing, for example, screen grabs or any information that they might have. The important thing is that the window for submitting that information and participating in the investigation is between 5 and 19 September, which is 10 days from today.

12.30 pm

I take the opportunity and the platform in the Assembly to call on anyone who is listening in or watching or is in the Chamber and was impacted by that practice to have their say and to share their experiences with the CMA on its website. It takes only a few minutes. Hopefully, by taking part in the CMA investigation, the public and especially those affected can help to bring the unfair practice of dynamic pricing to an end.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr Buckley: This summer brought about a new Labour Government after 14 years of Conservative rule. We were all promised and it was heralded that the Labour Government would be honest, progressive and compassionate. They were to be a big contrast with what went before. How does that stack up when we look at actions such as the disgraceful attempts by the Labour Government to remove the winter fuel payment from 10 million pensioners across the United Kingdom? To put that in perspective, of the 306,000 pensioners in Northern Ireland, over 250,000 will lose the winter fuel payment. They are pensioners who have worked hard all their lives, built up pensions and held their own homes. They are genuinely concerned and worried as to what the winter will look like.

It says a lot about a Labour Government and what their priorities will be when their first action is to cut the fuel payment for those vulnerable, low-income pensioners. I am not talking about the millionaires, as some want to divert to quite often; I am talking about those who are on a low income and see the challenges that this will bring not only to them but to their well-being and family. It talks about priorities when you do something like that, rather than attempt to address some of the severe structural issues in finance across the United Kingdom. It ducks real issues.

Labour wants to pick the pockets of pensioners whilst, with the same hand, dishing out over £11 billion in foreign aid in relation to climate. Labour would rather target low-income families than address the ridiculous situation of over £8 million a day being spent in this country to house asylum seekers in hotels. Labour would rather cut pensioners' fuel payments than, as a first point of call, recoup or attempt to recoup over £2 billion that was lost in benefit fraud in the last financial year.

I urge the Government to do a U-turn. There is no shame: this is wrong.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Buckley: I urge colleagues in this place to do likewise.

Mr Speaker: The Member should take his seat.

Larne Football Club

Mr Donnelly: I rise to congratulate Larne Football Club. You will be aware that it recently became the first team from Northern Ireland to qualify for the knockout stages of a European tournament. That is an historic achievement for the town club and for football in Northern Ireland. Over the last few years, Larne has not only won the Irish League title but retained it, and it is now a contender in the knockout stages of a European competition. The club has a huge dream ahead. Those are huge achievements in the club's 130-plus years' history.

As anyone who knows me will attest, I am not much of a football fan, but I have attended several matches with people who are fans, and I can say that the atmosphere is fantastic. There is a real sense of pride in the team and hope for the future. Families and children decked out in Larne gear cheer on the team for the duration of the matches. There is a real buzz about the town on match days.

The team is involved in many local issues around the town. It inspires young people to become involved in sport through its full-time scholarship programme and youth teams. I congratulate Larne owner, Kenny Bruce; chairman, Gareth Clements; manager, Tiernan Lynch; and all the staff and players who have brought so much excitement and joy to the town and fans over the past few years, especially with this summer's historic achievement. The team is very much for the town.

Veterans Commissioner for Northern Ireland

Lord Elliott: I rise to raise the issue of the resignation of the Veterans Commissioner, Danny Kinahan, just last week. It impacts directly on the veterans community and, indeed, wider society in Northern Ireland. Mr Kinahan has raised urgent concerns regarding the support, protections and independent representation available to veterans in Northern Ireland. He cited an inability to:

"provide the independent voice that veterans require",

which underscores a critical development in how veterans' affairs are managed in Northern Ireland. That recent event has sparked widespread concern across the veterans community and beyond, making it a matter of immediate relevance.

The role of the Veterans Commissioner for Northern Ireland is vital in advocating for the specific needs and concerns of veterans, many of whom feel that they are being neglected, when compared with their counterparts in Great Britain. The representation in Northern Ireland claims that veterans in the region do not enjoy the same protections as those in Great Britain, which, coupled with the recent loss of the Northern Ireland Veterans' Support Office, underscores an alarming development that could lead to a gap in support. Given the sacrifices made by veterans, any perceived failure in providing adequate support is of exceptional public interest and requires immediate attention by the Assembly and the Northern Ireland Office.

The veterans' community comprises individuals who have served and sacrificed for the country. Those veterans, their families and the broader community are directly affected by the lack of an independent voice advocating for their unique needs. The resignation not only highlights the specific concerns of the veterans in Northern Ireland but brings to light the broader issue of how their welfare is managed by the UK Government, making it a matter that impacts on many citizens in Northern Ireland.

Men's Action Network

Mr Durkan: I call for urgent and sustained funding for the Men's Action Network (MAN), an organisation that has made an enormous impact on the lives of men in my constituency. The group has been life-changing for many and life-saving for some who felt that they had nowhere else to turn. Males accounted for 77% of suicides registered in 2022. That figure was even higher in areas of deprivation and among young men aged between 20 and 24. It is, therefore, ludicrous that such a key support network in Derry has been stripped of funding, with Ministers stating that there is nothing they can do in light of Departments' precarious funding positions and refusing to meet the group and hear from service users.

Men face significant mental health challenges. Many struggle in silence, burdened by societal expectations of masculinity that discourage vulnerability, but that stigma is slowly eroding thanks to such groups as MAN, which provide a

safe space, address isolation and give community support. I am sure that I speak for everyone here when I say that navigating the past few extremely difficult years would have been impossible without our voluntary and community sector. The sector has always stepped in when traditional statutory services have been overstretched, all the while working within extremely challenging budget positions of their own.

MAN is unique in its intersectional approach. Few organisations address such a wide array of interconnected issues: mental health support; educational opportunities; breaking down barriers in the legal system; and, perhaps most crucially, working with male victims of domestic violence — so often an overlooked issue. MAN was the critical juncture in establishing a male refuge, plans for which have now had to be put on hold. The failure to fund an organisation like that sends a strong wrong message to men who are suffering. Let me assure them: there is still help out there, and no one has to suffer in silence.

MAN's work spans several Departments, and thus ensuring that the group is funded should be the responsibility of the Executive as a whole. Investment will save the public purse in the long run by preventing crises and reducing the demand on overstretched public services. More importantly, it will save lives. A good Government would never leave MAN behind.

Warrenpoint: Refuse-derived Fuel Odour

Ms Ennis: For a full year, the community in Warrenpoint has been subjected to an oppressive, foul odour that has engulfed our town, owing to the close proximity of Warrenpoint harbour and the large volumes of refuse-derived fuel (RDF) or household waste currently stored there. Tens of thousands of tons of household waste is stored mere metres from people's homes and businesses. It causes a putrid smell that impacts on people's daily lives. I seriously question how appropriate it was to grant a licence to store that volume of household waste so close to people's homes in the first place. For example, people have been dealing with the fact that their homes are swarming with flies and they cannot open their windows. We have dealt with a family with a young child with autism. His only relief is to go out into his back garden. That cannot happen anymore, because the smell is so overwhelming.

We had two successful festivals in Warrenpoint this summer. Unfortunately, although both festivals were very successful, they were both overshadowed by the constant smell lingering in the air. People will be aware that we finally have movement on the Narrow Water bridge. Our council and local political representatives are working on how to use that to best boost our local economy and attract more people and tourism to Warrenpoint. That will be at odds with the fact that the smell emanating from the household waste stored at Warrenpoint port is being allowed to continue.

Contrary to what is being said in the media and on social media sites, unfortunately, a large volume of household waste continues to flood into Warrenpoint port. The people of Newry, Mourne and Down are reasonable. We want to play our part and support more environmentally friendly ways of dealing with our household waste, but that cannot be to the detriment of the people of Warrenpoint. It is simply not good enough to expect the community in Warrenpoint to continue to put up and shut up on this issue.

Sinn Féin will continue to use every avenue that is open to us to resolve the issue. I again call on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, the NIEA and all those with responsibility to continue to work with us, the community groups, political representatives and the business community to ensure that the oppressive odour that has engulfed our town for more than a year is stopped once and for all.

Emergency Services Day

Ms Brownlee: On Emergency Services Day, it is important for us to take a moment to express our deep gratitude to the remarkable individuals who serve in our emergency services. Today provides an opportunity to truly recognise and honour the unwavering dedication, incredible bravery and profound sacrifice of those who work tirelessly to protect and serve our communities day in, day out. Our firefighters, police officers, paramedics and rescue workers consistently go above and beyond the call of duty, often facing dangerous and unpredictable situations. From responding to house fires and medical emergencies to addressing public safety threats as the first line of defence, they frequently put their lives at risk to protect ours.

Emergency Services Day is also a day on which we acknowledge the countless volunteers who wholeheartedly support those efforts. Their readiness to step forward during a crisis is a powerful testament to their resilience and community spirit. We are deeply thankful

for the commitment and selflessness that they demonstrate, especially in the most challenging of circumstances. In addition, it is essential to take some time to reflect on the individuals who have tragically lost their lives in the line of duty. Their sacrifice will never be forgotten, and their legacy continues to inspire us all.

12.45 pm

I extend my heartfelt thanks to each and every one of our emergency services workers for their unwavering dedication. We stand beside you, we support you and we will continually work to ensure that you receive the resources and recognition that you truly deserve. Today and every day, we honour your service.

Church of the Holy Name, Greenisland: Fire

Mr Dickson: Last Sunday evening, a major fire occurred in my home community of Greenisland at a Church of Ireland church known as the Church of the Holy Name. Following Ms Brownlee's comments, I place on record my thanks to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, the PSNI and Northern Ireland Water, all of which assisted so remarkably on that very sad and difficult evening.

That event brought the community of Greenisland together, as, indeed, I expected it would, having been a lifelong resident in the community. We came together last Wednesday evening not only to reflect on and think about the incident that occurred but to look positively to the future, to rebuild that church community and to build on our endeavours to unite the community of Greenisland. I place on record my thanks to the Reverend Isobel Hawthorne-Steele, who is in charge of the congregation there, for her grace in the way in which she handled all the difficult events that followed the fire.

Lá Idirnáisiúnta chun an tOideachas a Chosaint ar an Ionsaí

Mr Sheehan: Inniu an Lá Idirnáisiúnta chun an tOideachas a Chosaint ar an Ionsaí. Is ceart bunúsach é an t-oideachas, ceart nach raibh i dtólamh ar fáil sa tír seo, ach anois, ceart atá neamhiontach againn anseo in Éirinn. Ní hamhlaidh i go leor tíortha eile, áfach.

I dtrátha an ama seo anuraidh, bhí breis agus 625,000 mac léinn ar scoil in Gaza agus breis agus 20,000 múinteoir ag obair ann. Dar leis na Náisiúin Aontaithe nach bhfuil foghlaim ar bith

ar bun in Gaza inniu. Cá bhfuil mar a bheadh foghlaim ar bun ann nuair atá corradh agus 80% de na scoileanna in Gaza scriosta ag fórsaí Iosrael?

Gan fiú scoileanna de chuid na Náisiúin Aontaithe nach bhfuil dul acu ón ionsaí Iosraelach. Seo scoileanna, a Cheann Comhairle, a chuir na Náisiúin Aontaithe ar bun le haghaidh teifigh Phalaistíneacha. Tá breis agus 50% de na scoileanna sin scriosta ag fórsaí Iosrael anois fosta. Tá ionsaí Iosrael ar an chóras oideachais chomh forleathan sin go bhfuil focal ag na Náisiúin Aontaithe air: an léanndíothú.

Faoi mhí Aibreáin i mbliana, bhí beagnach 6,000 scoláire marbh, beagnach 300 múinteoir marbh agus beagnach 100 léachtóir ollscoile marbh as siocair ionsaithe Iosrael. Agus is cinnte go ndeachaigh an scéal chun donais ó shin.

Tá beagnach 6,000 páiste ar naíscoil anseo sna Sé Chontae. Tá thart ar 1,500 ionad oideachais againn. Dá ndéanfaí an scrios agus an sléacht céanna sna Sé Chontae agus atá déanta ag Iosrael in Gaza b'ionann é agus gach páiste naíscoile anseo bás a fháil in ionsaithe míleata. B'ionann é agus gach naíscoil, gach bunscoil, gach meánscoil agus gach scoil ghramadaí anseo a bheith scriosta glan. Nuair a scriostar scoileanna, scriostar saol agus seans na chéad ghlúine eile.

Inniu an Lá Idirnáisiúnta chun an tOideachas a Chosaint ar an Ionsaí. Iarraim ar an phobal idirnáisiúnta brú a chur ar Iosrael éirí as an chinedhíothú agus éirí as an léanndíothú in Gaza.

International Day to Protect Education from Attack

Mr Sheehan: *[Translation: Today is International Day to Protect Education from Attack. Education is a fundamental right, a right that has not always been available in this country, but now, a right that we take for granted here in Ireland. However, this is not the case in many other countries.*

This time last year, there were more than 625,000 students at school in Gaza and more than 20,000 teachers working there. According to the UN, there is no learning taking place in Gaza today. How could there be learning when Israeli forces have destroyed more than 80% of the schools in Gaza?

Not even schools run by the United Nations escape Israeli attack. These are schools that were set up by the UN for Palestinian refugees. More than 50% of those UN schools have now also been destroyed by Israeli forces. Israeli attacks on the education system are so bad that the United Nations has a name for it: scholasticide.

By April of this year, nearly 6,000 students were dead, nearly 300 teachers dead and nearly 100 university lecturers dead as a result of Israeli attacks. The situation has certainly worsened since then.

There are almost 6,000 children at nursery school in the Six Counties. We have around 1,500 educational centres. If that destruction and slaughter at the hands of Israel were to be visited upon the Six Counties, it would equate to every nursery-school child here dying in a military attack. It would be the same as every nursery school, every primary school, every secondary school and every grammar school here being completely destroyed. When schools are destroyed, so too are the lives and chances of the next generation.

Today is the International Day to Protect Education from Attack. I call on the international community to bring pressure to bear on Israel to stop the genocide and stop the scholasticide in Gaza.]

Newtownards: Second World War Bomb

Miss McIlveen: On 17 August, the police instructed the occupants of around 450 homes in Newtownards to vacate their premises the following day because an 1,100-lb bomb had been uncovered by workmen. The bomb was dropped in 1941 during a German bombing raid. The discovery of the Second World War bomb caused tremendous upheaval for the residents of Rivenwood, Old Forge, Stratheden and the surrounding areas. Residents were told that they could be out of their homes for five days or longer. Ards and North Down Borough Council opened an emergency support centre in Ards Blair Mayne leisure complex that included support and information from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, social services, the Housing Executive and the police.

Residents who had no alternative accommodation were able to come to the complex for shelter and support. The incident really brought out the best in our local community, with offers of rooms, support and

even temporary homes for pets of all types. Given that the incident affected around 1,000 people, it is incredible how many people opened up their homes.

I spent some time at the hub over the three days of the incident, where I spoke to multi-agency staff, council staff and some of those who were displaced. I express my gratitude to those who were involved in the response to the emergency. I was contacted by a large number of residents, who had nothing but praise for the assistance that they received. Special mention must go to the council's chief executive, leisure centre staff, the council's emergency response team and the council's communications team for stepping up at such short notice; the PSNI and ammunition technical officer (ATO) teams for their speed and professionalism; and the staff of the statutory agencies for their support and advice over the three days of the incident.

A message that came though loud and clear during and after the incident, however, was on the lack of financial support. Many residents who were displaced lost out financially. There were those who lost out on work because their vans or tools were stuck behind the cordon, as well as those who work from home but could not do so from their temporary accommodation. There were those who had to stay in B&Bs and hotels, and there was one group of elderly ladies who had just paid for an additional two-night stay when the bomb was set off and they were allowed to return home. They have been wrangling with the hotel chain ever since to refund the money. Others had to pay for accommodation for their pets. There was also damage to properties following the blast. We have no clarity as to whether insurance companies will cover the cost, and they certainly will not cover the excess.

Since the incident, I have written to the Minister and I have tabled a question on whether a one-off payment can be made. I have not received a response as yet, but I hope that we can offer support to those who were directly affected. We were able to support those who were affected by adverse weather, so surely we can support those who were affected by the unforeseen circumstances of a 1941 bombing raid.

Grenfell Inquiry

Mr Butler: On 14 June 2017, the Grenfell Tower fire shook the world. At 12.54 am, flames engulfed a 24-storey tower in north Kensington in west London. That fire raged for 60 hours, tragically claiming 72 lives, injuring over 70 more and forcing 223 residents to flee. Last

week, many of those families received some justice, which will have fallen far short seeing that they are without loved ones whom they have lost forever. We need to consider the inquiry and all the failings that were detailed in it.

The disaster was not simply an accident. It highlighted years of underinvestment, neglect and unsafe building practices. Despite concerns raised by residents about fire safety, including the highly flammable cladding that was used in recent renovations, those warnings went unheard. A lack of regulatory oversight, cost-cutting measures and inadequate responses from the authorities compounded the tragedy.

The Grenfell fire stands as a stark reminder of the human cost of negligence and inequality, and it calls us all to action to ensure that every life, regardless of background or circumstance, is safeguarded by the highest standards of safety and care. I was struck by the comments made in the inquiry report — I thank Ms Brownlee and Mr Dickson for mentioning Emergency Services Day — by a firefighter who was at the Grenfell incident and subsequently had to retire early due to PTSD. That firefighter had an unfortunate calculation to make, whilst trying to rescue people from the twenty-first floor of the tower, on turning back for the sake of his own life and those of his team. He was left with that burden.

From my own time in the Fire Service, I remember the impact of cost-cutting and changes to legislation and policy by those who did not have operational expertise. I echo and support the calls by the two Members I mentioned for support for the emergency services as we go forward.

Voting Age

Ms Armstrong: This coming weekend, on 15 September, is International Day of Democracy. Each one of us is in this Chamber because citizens used their vote to elect us to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Some people in Northern Ireland, however, are excluded from being able to vote. In Scotland and Wales, 16- and 17-year-olds are able to cast their democratic vote to have a say in who will govern in their local government area and local Parliament, but our 16- and 17-year-olds here are not entrusted with the same democratic right as those elsewhere across the UK and it is time that that were changed.

Some say that a 16- or 17-year-old is too young, not able to understand or too

inexperienced to cast a vote. As a woman, I know that 100 years ago — more than 100 years ago — they were saying that about women, and look at how that has changed. We have a female First Minister, a female deputy First Minister and a female Minister of Justice. Each year, politicians and society celebrate how well our 16- and 17-year-olds do in exams. Why, on the one hand, are those intelligent and amazing people being celebrated for their achievements but, on the other hand, are being denied the ability to vote? Why do we celebrate our Youth Assembly and youth forums across Northern Ireland but exclude them from their democratic right?

Negative assumptions about the ability of younger voters are discussed in a blog that Professor David Runciman of the University of Cambridge published in June 2024. He sets out how presumptions about younger voters did not materialise in Germany, Belgium or Greece when their voting age was lowered. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds were far from predictable and were found to replicate the voting patterns of other age groups.

It is important to remember that younger voters want to vote. In a recent NUS survey, 97% of respondents said that they would vote in future elections. If only all age groups would turn out in such a high percentage. If Scotland and Wales can do it, Northern Ireland should enable 16- and 17-year-olds to have democratic rights that are equal to those of their peers elsewhere in the UK.

We have all been elected as MLAs because of the democratic process. Enabling votes at the age of 16 for council and Assembly elections would be a positive and progressive step for Northern Ireland. As many in the House know, voting age is a matter that is excepted under paragraph 12 of schedule 2 to the 1998 Act. The Assembly has no power to make the change. That would need a Act of Parliament, so I wrote to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to ask that the legislation regarding the voting age in Northern Ireland elections be updated to enable people who are aged 16 and above to vote. The Secretary of State responded, confirming that it is his wish to extend that democratic right to 16- and 17-year-olds. Indeed, Labour committed in its manifesto to extending the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds.

In 2012, Sinn Féin's Megan Fearon tabled a motion calling for votes at the age of 16, and the House passed it, so I say to the Secretary of State —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Armstrong: — you have the time, please bring the vote forward.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Resolved:

That Mrs Michelle Guy replace Ms Kate Nicholl as a member of the Committee for Education and as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee; that Ms Kate Nicholl replace Ms Connie Egan as a member of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee; and that Ms Kate Nicholl be appointed as a member of the Committee for the Economy. — [Ms Bradshaw.]

Committee Membership

Resolved:

That Mr Colin Crawford replace Mr Doug Beattie as a member of the Committee for the Economy. — [Mr Butler.]

Committee Membership

Resolved:

That Mr Timothy Gaston replace Mr Pádraig Delargy as a member of the Committee for the Executive Office. — [Mr Butler.]

Ministerial Statement

Programme for Government: Public Consultation

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement. Before I call the deputy First Minister, I remind Members that their questions must be concise. It is not an opportunity for debate or long introductions. That will not be allowed.

1.00 pm

Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First Minister): The First Minister and I wish to inform Members that, following the Executive's unanimous agreement to the draft Programme for Government (PFG) on Thursday, the Executive Office will today launch a public consultation.

The draft Programme for Government outlines the Executive's bold ambition for Northern Ireland. It is different from what has been attempted in the past. It is reflective of the realities that we face today, but it is also ambitious for the future. It is also realistic about the financial position that we find ourselves in and the shortened mandate in which we operate. We make no apology for being ambitious. We want to build on our reputation as a great place to live, work, study, invest and visit. We want to build on the fact that we are global leaders in key sectors such as cyber, fintech, advanced manufacturing and health and life sciences, and we want to continue to invest in our young people so that we can continue to have a young, dedicated and highly skilled workforce. Our aim is to change the lives of our people and communities for the better.

To deliver on that aim, the Programme for Government contains nine priorities. They are the immediate priorities that we will work to this year and throughout the duration of this mandate. They are to grow a globally competitive and sustainable economy; to deliver more affordable childcare; to cut health waiting lists; ending violence against women and girls; better support for children and young people with special educational needs; to provide more social, affordable and sustainable housing; safer communities; protecting Lough Neagh and the environment; and the reform and transformation of public services. We must all focus on delivering the programme together for everyone.

We know that there are challenges, but there are opportunities. With 'Our Plan', we have a way forward. It provides a road map for people, organisations and Departments. The Programme for Government provides a basis for transformational change in the things that really matter. I look forward to us — the Executive and the Assembly — working together to make a real difference.

The scale of the challenges that we face requires new thinking and structures. A missions-based approach will help us to measure and prioritise our work. Those missions are "People", "Planet" and "Prosperity", and they are underpinned by a cross-cutting commitment to "Peace".

When it comes to "People", we have some of the highest levels of life satisfaction in Europe, but not everyone here is able to have a positive experience of life. People from more deprived areas are more likely to suffer from poorer physical and mental health, for example. We need to invest in people and ensure that they are supported to succeed and prosper. We want everyone to reach their full potential.

The "Planet" mission focuses on the natural environment. It is vital to everyone's health and well-being both now and in the future. We are all very aware of the increasingly evident biodiversity crisis, as seen, for example, at Lough Neagh.

The "Prosperity" mission considers our economic performance. While it has improved dramatically in the past 25 years, it still lags behind where it could and should be. Our GDP per capita remains stubbornly low, and that is particularly true outside Belfast. We need to make sure that we are building the skills needed to attract investment that can grow our economy and benefit workers everywhere.

In terms of "Peace", we want to build on the successes of the past 26 years to make sure that our peace is lasting, meaningful and prosperous for everyone here. By focusing on "People", "Planet" and "Prosperity", we will shape a fairer and more peaceful society. We know that equality of opportunity and good relations are central to that goal, supporting our commitment to safer communities.

A key feature of the new programme is its focus on collaborative working between organisations and groups across the public, voluntary and private sectors. It is also a programme in which individuals and communities can play an active part. The Executive will therefore work collectively to deliver the programme and to

drive forward work across departmental and sectoral boundaries. We will also be tracking performance regularly and publishing annual reports on the progress that we are making so that everyone can understand the impact that we are having. To improve the lives of people here, we need to deliver real change, and the Programme for Government provides us with a framework to deliver that change as an Executive.

Mr Speaker, we are determined to find solutions. We are determined to take action to ensure that our communities have access to the life opportunities that they deserve. We are determined to make this a place that we can all be proud to call "home". We are determined to deliver for the public. The consultation will provide people here with an opportunity to consider the programme and provide their views on it. We can have an effective plan for Northern Ireland only if we can hear from those on whom it is most likely to impact. That is why it is important that as many people as possible share their views during the consultation process. 'Our Plan' is for all of us, and we all have a stake in making it happen.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an leas-Chéad Aire as ucht a ráitis. [*Translation: I thank the deputy First Minister for her statement.*] It is a significant milestone for the four-party Executive, particularly as it sets out the priorities of the draft PFG for the rest of the mandate. How confident is the deputy First Minister that the draft PFG commitments will be delivered?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. This is the stage when we want to listen to people's views about the priorities. In putting together the draft Programme for Government, we have been listening to many people, and we believe that the draft document represents the key issues that matter most to people. They are the issues on which people want us to make progress.

I am confident that all four parties in the Executive and, certainly, the First Minister and I share a determination to ensure that we deliver. We have made it clear that we want the Executive to deliver. As we jointly lead the Executive, we want to give a commitment to everyone throughout Northern Ireland that we have the determination to deliver. The best way to do that is with a plan that is put together by listening to people, by focusing on the right things and with a joint determination to make a real and positive difference to people's lives.

Mr O'Toole: The constructive Opposition have been constructive in calling for a Programme for Government for months now. We welcome the fact that one has been published, but we have also been clear that the people of Northern Ireland expected clear targets and clear plans to deliver.

On page 27 of the Programme for Government, there is a chart that lists the increase in patients waiting for a consultant appointment. The number went from 70,000 in 2008-09 to 428,000 in the most recent year, but I cannot find anywhere in the document a specific target to reduce those times and waiting lists. Will the deputy First Minister please point me to such a target in the document?

Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister): I hope that the leader of the Opposition will continue in his constructive approach and engage with the draft Programme for Government that was published today. I am pleased that we have reached this point, that it is an ambitious and focused programme, that everyone in society will now get a chance to shape it into the final document and that, alongside the final document, we will be able to judge our success by how we measure the outcome. I am delighted that we are absolutely committed to being open and transparent about the progress that we will make.

Nobody in the Chamber underestimates the scale of the challenge in our health service, but the best way to fix it is to work together. It is not just the Department of Health's responsibility; all Executive colleagues are now committed to working together to ensure that we bring down hospital waiting lists.

At the end of the day, the Programme for Government has to be about making a difference in people's lives. I am confident that we have the plan to turn things around. I am confident that the whole Executive are committed to transformation. I am also confident that we can be judged along the way, when we have the final Programme for Government and our well-being framework. I know that the Member had a chance to look through the document only briefly before the session, but he will see from it that we will publish annual reports, we will be able to be measured against what we have set out to achieve, we will mark our progress under each mission — whether it is "People", "Planet" or "Prosperity" — in terms of "Peace", and, once we have the final Programme for Government, there will be a set of outcomes and indicators alongside it. All of society will be able to judge how successful the Executive have been.

Ms Bunting: The statement rightly makes many references to life, but, as Benjamin Franklin said:

"Nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes."

We are not responsible for taxes, so I will come to the issues of death, dying and bereavement and their inclusion in the PFG. In the previous mandate, the Assembly unanimously passed a motion on a cross-party basis that death, dying and bereavement would be included, because they are fundamental aspects of life. Is the Executive Office open to having conversations on the inclusion of such an issue?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I recognise that the Member has been a huge champion of dignity in dying and the support that is required for that. She spoke of the inevitability of death for us all. The First Minister and I are up for having that conversation and for engaging with those in the sector on how that issue is reflected. It is critical that the Programme for Government follows that life-cycle approach. It is often said that healthcare is from the cradle to the grave, but, as we know, there is also important work to be done before birth to support mothers, and that work can impact on children's life opportunities. The Programme for Government is based very much on that life-cycle approach. It is a critical aspect, and we look forward to engaging with the Member on it.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for meeting Connie Egan and me this morning to touch briefly on this. I will pick up on the title of the report: "Doing What Matters Most". The deputy First Minister mentioned the consultation process. I am sure that a lot of stakeholders and voluntary sector groups will scour the document for mention of their area. How will you manage expectations for the consultation process? How will you ensure that people do not feel that their issues do not matter?

Mrs O'Neill: I look forward to working with the Committee Chair, the Deputy Chair and the entire Committee as we gather responses to the consultation. We need to send a strong message to wider society that this is a draft document and that we are listening. We are in listening mode. The document is the basis on which, we think, we can go out to consultation, but there is no doubt that there will be constructive comments and things that we may be able to include. Where we cannot include

things, perhaps we can talk it out with those who advocate a different approach.

We have a huge body of work to do to build confidence through how we engage. We will come at this with an eight-week consultation period and 12 weeks for the equality impact screening. We will also go out to engage in person, and we will encourage all Ministers to do likewise. We will go out very much to listen to people and to hear what they have to say. Through our political briefs, we will all have a role to play in engaging with different sectoral interests. As the Member said, perhaps everybody will be picking over the document today, wanting to see their part. That is OK, because that is the area that they are interested in.

Encouraging people to engage with the process through a combination of in-person and online engagement will lead to a fulsome Programme for Government. The Committee's role will also be vital to make sure that we have the best possible Programme for Government that is fit for purpose. That is the Executive's collective will.

Mr Chambers: I welcome the fact that one of the priorities is tackling health waiting lists. Waiting list initiatives are the vehicle that will be used to deliver those critical activities. Can the deputy First Minister confirm that bids for funding to deliver those efforts such as was sought but refused earlier this year will now be considered more favourably?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Member has raised the question of the commitment to cutting waiting lists. It is there. It is one of the nine key priorities. The document simply states, "Cut Health Waiting Times", and we are determined to do that. That cannot happen without transformation. It cannot continue to be the case that additional funds go in and outcomes not just remain the same but get worse. We therefore need a plan, and we will work with the Health Minister to support that. Where there is a need for additional expertise, we will look to that. We want to move on this urgently, and, if that priority is agreed following consultation — I believe that it will be, because it is an important issue that detrimentally impacts on so many people — there will be specific targets and an action plan attached to the commitment, and we will work with the Health Minister on what he can bring forward to support real and meaningful progress against that Programme for Government priority year on year.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement, particularly for the emphasis on collaborative working and the community playing an active part. In light of that, do they agree that it is essential that all voices provide input into shaping and informing the consultation process?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. We ask that engagement with the process be as wide as possible. Again, Committees and the Member, in his role as the Chair of a Committee, will have the opportunity to engage with people from across all sectors.

We want to hear from the labour movement, civic society, the business community, academia and, of course, our young people. We have done particular work on looking at the impact on young people as part of the Programme for Government consultation.

1.15 pm

I say to everybody that this is our plan. This is what is going to make a difference to us, our families and wider society. We need to drive home the message that everybody has a stake in it, that everybody has an opportunity to shape it, and that we very much want to engage and listen. As I said, we want the end result to be that we have made a difference to people's lives and that we can be judged on that. We are confident that we can improve some of the areas that we know are in huge difficulties, not least our public services after 10-plus years of austerity. The challenges that we, as a public sector, face will be fixed only if we transform how we do things. That is why you can see the whole way through the consultation document that it talks about transformation being key.

Mrs Erskine: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement. I welcome the Programme for Government in the face of many challenges that are facing the Executive. One such issue is investment in our waste water treatment. I welcome the document's references to creating better infrastructure. However, some of the funding for capital works relating to waste water treatment will fall under the investment strategy, so can the Minister point to work that is actively taking place in that regard so that it can tie in with the core missions of the Programme for Government?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her very important question. We are all very conscious of the importance of investment in waste water and sewerage and the impact that

that has on planning applications and environmental issues in relation to Lough Neagh, for example. It is critical; it is one of the most urgent issues that we are facing. We are also acutely aware — we have discussed it on a number of occasions in the Executive — that that has a potential impact on a number of the priorities, not least in social, affordable and sustainable housing but in relation to growing our economy and other connected issues, particularly environmental issues.

The Member is absolutely right: the primary vehicle for that will be the investment strategy for Northern Ireland. We are working on that. We want to engage, of course, with all Committees, but particularly those Committees, such as hers, that have a particular focus on infrastructure, to make sure that that 10-plus-year plan on capital can do what it needs to do. Budget is, of course, going to be really important. We know how difficult the circumstances are in that regard currently.

Ms Egan: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for meeting the Chair of the Executive Office Committee this morning. I am very glad to see that ending violence against women and girls is a priority. How will you make sure that all Departments have input to ending violence, misogyny and abuse towards women and girls?

Mrs O'Neill: I appreciate the ongoing emphasis that the Member, alongside other colleagues, puts on that area. I am very pleased to say that, hopefully, next week, we will be able to announce our strategy to end violence against women and girls. The Executive signed off on that piece of work last week. As the Member rightly points out, that is a whole-of-society problem that we have. We must do everything that we can to end violence against women and girls, particularly after the summer that has just gone, during which, tragically, three more women lost their lives. I will be delighted to, hopefully, say a lot more about that next week, when we present our strategy for ending violence against women and girls.

Miss Brogan: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement today. The four-party Executive have taken significant action since coming into office on matters around the public-sector pay award and the interim fiscal framework. You have made progress on the Budget and agreed a legislative programme. Building on the work to date, can the deputy First Minister detail what is in the draft Programme for Government?

Mrs O'Neill: As the deputy First Minister set out, we have focused on nine priorities. That is really important, because this is a different, shortened mandate, and one that has been marred by financial challenges, not least because of austerity over the past 14 years. With those two main challenges in mind, it was important that we tried to reimagine the Programme for Government or look at it in a different way. That is why we focused very clearly on those nine key objectives. It is not an exhaustive list; it is a list that the Executive collectively committed to work together on and ensure that we have delivery on. Outside of that, all other Departments also have their own areas of responsibility and work. The new approach reflects the reality of the challenging situation that we face with the finances, but, equally, alongside that, the document, I hope, points to hope. There are opportunities to grow our economy, attract trade, create more and better-paid jobs, address regional imbalance and lift everybody in society up. Those are the things that we are very much going to focus on, and that is why I say that everybody has a stake in what is being set out here today.

Mr Kingston: I welcome the publication of the draft Programme for Government and the fact that all four parties in the Executive have signed up to it. It is important, now, that the Executive engage with the public during the consultation. We have heard some detail, but can we hear more detail on how the Executive intend to carry out that consultation?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. As was indicated, it is critical that we listen to people. Ultimately, we want to deliver, and what we want to deliver will impact on all throughout Northern Ireland, particularly the big issues such as healthcare reform and, for example, the affordable childcare strategy and tackling the big issues in education, particularly in relation to special educational needs. Those are issues that impact on so many people throughout Northern Ireland. We want to listen and we must do so. Therefore, there will be a range of methods used to try to gather those views. There will be an online process, and there will be the ability to write in and give your views. We will also be going out as an Executive and engaging with people through workshops and roadshows, outside and within Belfast, to really listen to people on a sectoral basis about the issues that they want to see reflected in the Programme for Government.

Mr Butler: I do not want the First Minister and deputy First Minister to be fighting over answering my question, as they did for Ms

Brogan's question. I do not want to be negative, but I will be honest, if that is OK. It is really good that you have brought this draft Programme for Government to us and put it out for discussion, but, in reality, the two things that have affected the people in Northern Ireland the most over the past eight years have been the lack of funding and political abstentionism. You have got off to a great start in your roles as First Minister and deputy First Minister, but the timeline of delivery will require a stable Government who are here when big decisions need to be made. Have we a commitment from the Executive Office that that will be the case, not just for this mandate but into the next one?

Mrs O'Neill: I apologise to the deputy First Minister; I did not realise that I had answered two questions in a row. We are supposed to alternate, but anyway. I will take Mr Butler's question.

We are launching a draft Programme for Government, and it does not get more real than that. That is what we are here to do. We are here to be in government together; the four parties of the Executive. We have set out very real and meaningful plans that we think will make a difference to people's lives. We are focused on prosperity and lifting everybody up, which is what the public want to see. They want political leaders to work together. They want us to find solutions to the big problems of today, and that is what we think we have cracked in the Programme for Government insofar as it sets out our focus on those immediate priorities. It also allows us to build for the future, which is important. Therefore, we are setting very firm foundations for how we move forward.

Obviously, making a lot of this work will depend on the whole financial situation and getting that right. We are determined and are at one, as a four-party Executive, in fighting the good fight for properly funded public services here. That is not special treatment; it is fair and is what people are entitled to. We will engage with the Labour Government continuously in trying to get to that right juncture.

Mr Kearney: Gabhaim buíochas leis na hAíré as ucht a ráitis a chur ar fáil an tráthnóna seo. [*Translation: I thank the Ministers for their statement this afternoon.*] The Ministers will understand that public services here have been underfunded and below need for a significant number of years as a result of successive decisions by British Governments. The early indications are that the Labour Administration may well be prioritising austerity over the resilience of public services. Is í an cheist atá agam oraibh beirt, mar sin: [*Translation: So, my*

question to you both, is:] do you believe that we have sufficient resources to deliver this Programme for Government?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. The Executive have a determination to deliver. We have set out our draft plan, trying to identify what we believe matters most to people throughout Northern Ireland, but the ability to deliver is fundamentally based on resources and the Budget that we have. We can do some things if we have a more limited Budget, but we could do more to improve lives if we had a better Budget. We have stepped up and said to the UK Government that we have a determination to have a sustainable Budget. We have a determination to be sensible and to have a sensible approach to our Budget, but we should have what we need in order to run our public services.

Up until this point, our Budget has really struggled. We can see that across all Departments, and we hear from all the Ministers about the resources that are required for them, including for, for example, Health and Education. A recent example of that is the winter fuel payment and the impact of the decision on that by the Labour Government on those who are very often the least capable of being able to afford to heat their homes. We have serious concerns, although I welcome the fact that we will meet the Chancellor this Thursday along with the Finance Minister. We will raise sustainable and proper funding for Northern Ireland. That is what people here need and deserve. We will be upfront and determined in making that case to the Treasury and the Chancellor. We will also raise issues such as the decision on the winter fuel payment.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for answering questions and for the production of a Programme for Government. It is an important way forward. I welcome the focus on health waiting lists. I do not know of any constituency office or area that we represent that will not be impacted by that fundamental issue.

A previous Member to speak referred to funding for health waiting lists, but does the First Minister recognise that there are structural problems and inequalities in the health service that will require huge decisions by the Executive and the wider Assembly? Will the First Minister tell the House whether the Health Minister has presented his plan for the transformation of the health service to the Executive? If not, will the First Minister guarantee to the House that that will be a priority for the Executive?

Mrs O'Neill: I can guarantee that it is a priority. It is one of the nine priorities that we have identified. As you said, collectively, we all have constituents who are in dire straits waiting to get into the health service. They are being forced to beg, borrow and steal sometimes to get private healthcare, and that is not acceptable. We also know many constituents who, day and daily, cannot get access to their GP. That is not acceptable, and it is not good enough.

We all need to focus on transformation and ask how we can support primary care and invest upfront in it, how we can bring care closer to families and how we can take the pressure from the acute end into that front-line investment. We need to see very concrete plans. We need to see something develop from the work that has been done to date. The Department of Health has published an elective care framework, and there have been some marginal improvements, albeit we are still in such a dire situation that it is hard to talk that up. In the aftermath of the Programme for Government being consulted on, we will see even more concrete plans coming forward from Health, and we will work with it on those. That is vital, because we need to get waiting lists down and we need to stop the wastage in our health service.

We know that we have first-class health and social care workers working in our system day and night under huge pressure. We have invested in them through public-sector pay, which was one of the first things that the Executive were able to do. Outside of that, we need to see real systems change and complete restructuring of the health service so that we can start to tackle health inequalities.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Dr Aiken] in the Chair)

A whole raft of things need to happen, including transformation, investment in the health service and programmes to bring down waiting times for people. Improving people's life and health outcomes is crucial, and I welcome the fact that the Health Minister has brought forward some initial plans on how he will develop more work on tackling health inequalities. There is a lot to do there, but it is a priority for us, and I assure you that, when we get to the end of the Programme for Government, we will need to look at what that looks like in waiting lists over year 1, year 2 and year 3.

Mr Blair: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the statement today and, in particular, for the reference to the:

"evident biodiversity crisis, as seen at Lough Neagh."

It seems clear to me that a meaningful environmental improvement plan is a crucial part of tackling the environmental, ecological and biodiversity crises.

My understanding is that the AERA Minister brought the environmental improvement plan to the Executive in March, just weeks after his appointment. Do the First Minister and deputy First Minister agree that the publication of that environmental improvement plan is now urgently as well as legally required as part of the actions that flow from the Programme for Government?

1.30 pm

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. Of course, Executive business is confidential. However, I agree with the Member that having an environmental improvement plan is important. I welcome the fact that, in the Executive, we were able to produce and agree the Lough Neagh plan to look at some of those urgent issues. On the wider picture of the Programme for Government, I welcome that it is a priority action, because we know that it is having a detrimental impact. We have only to look at Lough Neagh. We know the importance of Lough Neagh and those environmental aspects, but, of course, it is linked to other policies. There is no doubt that the water, sewage and waste water issues at Lough Neagh are critical. We have to resolve them. That will require investment. It will not be an easy fix — we know that — but I think that there is determination across all four Executive parties to find workable solutions.

We have a fantastic farming community in Northern Ireland. We have excellent agri-food products. Sometimes, there is apprehension in the farming sector that a disproportionate burden will be put on farming and agriculture on environmental actions. We need to make sure that, in fact, that will not be the case and that there will be a fair and proportionate approach. We know that, for example, as I have said, the waste water, sewerage and water infrastructure is a critical aspect of that, which we must tackle.

Mr McGrath: The Minister said in her statement that the Executive make no apology for being ambitious. Given that no new funding is being announced for our health service and the Department of Health continues to run at a deficit, will they at least apologise to the hundreds of thousands of people who are

languishing on waiting lists, who will have been looking to the statement for some hope but see warm words and no concrete actions?

Mrs O'Neill: I just do not agree. It is as simple as that. I say to the people who are on waiting lists and have been waiting a long time to get treatment that we will do absolutely everything that we can to help them get their treatment. We will work night and day to fix the health service, which has been put on its knees by a Tory austerity agenda for over 14 years. The Member knows that rightly. That is why his party signed up to the cross-party memo that we sent when we first re-formed the Executive.

This place has been underfunded, and we need to turn that picture. We are determined, as the four-party Executive, to make that happen. I am glad that we will go to the Treasury again this week and continue our engagement. We have been able to make some progress. We are determined to fight the fight for good finances here. We are determined to fight for a fair funding model. We are determined to fight for investment in our health service, because, on one hand, people are languishing on waiting lists, and, at the same time, the health service that they depend on has been starved because of deliberate policy set in London. That is not acceptable. We will continue to make the case for proper funding so that we can invest in our health service.

I am sure that, if you are sitting at home and have been waiting on a waiting list for a considerable period, what you want to know is this: "What is the solution?", "When will I get my appointment?", "How will it be fixed?", and "When will the health service be able to respond to individuals' needs?". That is what we will try to deliver.

Mrs Mason: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement and answers so far. Do they agree that much more must be done to make childcare provision more accessible and affordable?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her important question. Childcare has been a priority from day 1. I was really pleased that, because of its urgency and importance, we were able to get childcare on the agenda of the very first Executive meeting. We know that the cost of childcare puts a huge burden on families, but I really welcome that many thousands of families have received their first payment through the immediate £25 million childcare fund that we were able to secure and that our Education Minister, Paul Givan, has

been able to roll out. That is the feedback that I have got. It does not go far enough, but it makes a difference — a positive difference — to those really hard-pressed budgets.

It is a priority issue. I look forward to the significant work that will be completed in order to bring forward the substantive strategy. In the remainder of the mandate, I want that to be not just an absolutely key strategic action but a success story of the Executive. Again, it comes back to the budget challenges that we have. We can only do what we can with the Budget that we can get, but we will make the best possible case for additional resources by looking at what we have in order to prioritise that to support those hard-working families.

Mrs Guy: Thank you, deputy First Minister and First Minister, for your statement. It is positive to see the draft Programme for Government being published today, and we look forward to engaging more on implementation in the months and years ahead.

Alliance has led the way on childcare policy in recent years, and we are pleased to see the roll-out of interim measures this summer, including the subsidy scheme. As a mother who is, effectively, returning to the workplace full-time today, having taken time out and worked part-time when my kids were small, due in no small part to the challenge of childcare, I am really pleased to see that childcare has been given the profile that it deserves by being included in the priorities of the draft Programme for Government.

As part of the development of a wider childcare strategy, what measures will be provided to support school-age childcare?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member. Welcome to the Assembly: I look forward to working with you. We share with many in the House the passion for trying to get this one right. Childcare, as the deputy First Minister said, has been our priority from day 1. I am really pleased with the advances that we have been able to make. They are making a tangible difference out there across a range of things. In what we have been able to achieve in the first seven months, we have only got going.

In that first period — I have just been reflecting on this — we have been able to secure £9 million for the 15% childcare subsidy. I know that that is all for preschool-age children, so we have work to do on building that up, but we have also been able to put £7 million towards supporting children who face disadvantage, £2 million towards childcare providers, because we

need our childcare providers to stay in place, regardless of the age of the child, and we have made moves towards the expansion of the universal preschool education programme to provide up to 22.5 hours of care for children aged three to four. That is just the start of our getting going. There is a raft of work underneath all that that is about gathering evidence and working with the sector. Having identified it as one of our priorities, we will keep building on that. We need to move beyond the initial cohort and the younger children into school-aged children cohort, because there is also a burden there. The biggest burden for families right now in childcare is at that preschool age. That is why we have started there, but we absolutely have to walk to the end of the road.

As a granny, I understand the problem acutely from my family. I want us to be able to say to families, "We will try to support you through the childcare journey". We know how expensive it is, and we are trying to make sure that we get to a point where we support the childcare provider to stay in place and they in turn pass on a more affordable childcare cost to the family, which allows more people to stay in work. That is a win-win for everybody — it is a circular economy investment — and we are determined to keep building on it.

Mr McAleer: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for the launch of the draft PFG. Do the Ministers agree that regional balance must be a central component of the Programme for Government?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. Absolutely, we want to deliver not just for people who live in and around Belfast but everyone, no matter where they live in Northern Ireland. We recognise that, if we are to grow our economy and have good jobs and foreign direct investment and if we are to encourage companies to expand, to import and to do what we need them to do for us to have a robust, thriving, prosperous future for Northern Ireland, that has to be throughout Northern Ireland.

There are references in the draft Programme for Government — I hope that the Member has seen them — to focusing on addressing regional disparities and to ensuring that the programmes, as they roll out, roll out at least equally across Northern Ireland and that we address the particular issues facing our communities, should they be rural or urban, no matter where they are.

I look forward to engaging at the roadshows. I have no doubt that those issues will come up as

we get out and about. We look forward to engaging with people about how we can best serve them.

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement today. I will lead on from the previous question about regional balance. Regional inequality needs to end. The devastating impact of regional inequality is happening right before our eyes. What steps will you take to ensure that regional balance is a priority for every Department, and, more importantly, how will it be measured?

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you for the question. I will build on the previous answer. You can see that regional balance is peppered through the document because the prosperity agenda is for everybody, regardless of where they live. It is really important that we get it right. When we reflect on the economic vision that the Economy Minister set out, in which he talks about four priorities, we see that one of them is regional balance, making sure that we share the prosperity and attract investment into areas outside the greater Belfast area as well as the Belfast area.

It is really important to know, when reflecting on the increased productivity in the economic strategy, that that is about attracting more well-paid jobs that will lift people up. I am confident about the references to the Magee task force, which are about regional balance and ensuring that there is university provision in the north-west. Across the document, you will see a strong and healthy commitment across all Departments to regional balance because the plan is about everybody. It is about lifting everybody up, and it needs to be fair, equitable and shared, and everyone needs to enjoy the growth.

When the Member has a chance to properly reflect on it, she will see that throughout the document. No doubt, as part of our roadshows and going out and about, we will make sure that we are out in all parts and engaging with people and making sure that we get the views of people in urban versus rural areas. We need to hear everybody's view and how they feel about the plan. I am confident about the regional balance commitment.

Ms Mulholland: Thank you, First Minister and deputy First Minister, for the release of the draft Programme for Government.

I am fully aware that not every issue can be a priority, but I cannot help but be disappointed that addressing the crippling levels of poverty

experienced by more and more people in Northern Ireland was not made a priority, especially given how cross-cutting the issue of poverty is and that the cost of not addressing our levels of poverty puts even more pressure on our financial position.

At first glance, I can see that a fuel poverty strategy is expected in 2025, but I cannot see a specific Executive-led anti-poverty strategy. What are the key actions in the plan that will tackle the issues at the heart of poverty in our societies?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. Of course, tackling poverty is important. She will see that, throughout the Programme for Government, we have the aspiration to ensure that everyone can reach their full potential, and that must, of course, mean supporting people and tackling poverty, should that be financial poverty or educational underachievement.

I welcome the actions we have taken so far: £20 million towards tackling educational underachievement. However, we also felt it was important to have key priorities in the Programme for Government to tackle inequalities where they are most acutely felt. For example, on health inequalities, waiting lists and ill health, we know that far more people on lower incomes have chronic illnesses in their early fifties and have worse health outcomes.

I am standing beside the Communities Minister, and I am sure he has heard your question loud and clear. We have a statutory responsibility and obligation to bring forward the anti-poverty strategy. I know that he is actively working on that, and it will align with some of the key priorities identified in the Programme for Government. We have a determination to ensure that, as the First Minister has indicated, everyone is lifted up by tackling such things as affordable and social housing, waiting lists, support for hard-pressed families with affordable childcare, growing the economy and providing better jobs for people, which are all ways to lift people out of poverty. We need to do that collectively as an Executive.

Mr Durkan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad Aire agus leis an leas-Chéad Aire as a ráitis ar an Chlár Rialtais nua. *[Translation: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their statement on the new Programme for Government.]* I welcome the publication of the document and look forward to the consultation. While the draft document may be a bit light on detail, it identifies most of our biggest problems

and demonstrates an ambition to improve in those areas.

On the environment, primacy seems to have been given to Lough Neagh, which I understand. Can I ask and push for the inclusion of a remediation programme for the Mobuoy illegal dump to be at the heart of the programme as well? It is a major issue not just for our environment but for the economic development of the north-west.

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks for that. Lough Neagh has been given a particular focus, given the scale of the challenge that we face there and rightly so.

However, alongside that, there are a number of other actions in the document around climate action. Publishing our first climate action plan will obviously be a welcome development. The environmental improvement plan, which someone mentioned earlier, needs to be published and got out, because that will complement what we are trying to do with the Lough Neagh strategy.

1.45 pm

We want to have an integrated approach to water quality, we want to review the energy strategy in 2025 and we need a just transition committee. The raft of things that are there for the climate and energy area is quite strong. I am very conscious of the fact that the Minister himself is looking at the issue of Mobuoy, and we reflected on that last week. I am quite sure that he will have more to say about that in coming days, but I will not steal his thunder.

Mr Mathison: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for bringing the draft Programme for Government to the Assembly. I welcome the commitment to supporting children with special educational needs in the draft PFG. With that in mind, how will you ensure that the vital collaboration that is needed between Departments will be rolled out as part of this Programme for Government, to ensure that Education, Health and Economy genuinely work together in a way that is transformative and not tokenistic or tick-box?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. Even in the past week or so, we have seen how challenging it is for parents and children to get, in a timely way, the special educational needs support that they deserve and absolutely need.

Special educational needs statistics are stark. From 2017-18 to this financial year, there has

been a growth of some 147% in demand. That, of course, puts pressure on supply, and the supply has not caught up with that trajectory of demand, so there are big challenges in the area, and that is why it is a priority. That is why we pulled it out: we know and have listened to so many parents and young people going through very difficult circumstances.

Your question pertains more to the transformation and reform piece. That is all about how we work better to tackle these big issues. That is a critical piece in the process that we have. We have not always been the best at delivering what we want to deliver. We can only look, particularly in capital projects, at where there is delay and where something is not delivered, even though there is a collective intention and agreement to do so. Costs can increase dramatically so that people who need those services or use those roads or facilities cannot do so, so the delivery aspect is important. This PFG, for me, is about delivery, delivery, delivery. It is not just about the intention set out in the priorities, but about how we do business, identify the priorities and solutions and make sure that they are rolled out in a truly cross-departmental collaborative way and in a way that meets the outcomes. We should be measuring progress against those outcomes, and this Executive have the ambition to do that.

Mr Gaston: From the brief opportunity that we have been afforded to consider the document, it appears to me that there is no mention of either the protocol or the Windsor framework. We cannot claim to be securing our economic future while implementing a border that cuts us off from the rest of our Union and, indeed, the sixth biggest economy in the world. My question to the Minister is this: Stormont came back on the basis that Jeffrey Donaldson told the unionist people that there would be zero checks and zero paperwork when it came to trade between GB and Northern Ireland. That has not happened. What, in this document, aims to deliver those promises that allowed Stormont to return?

Mrs O'Neill: I can assure you that this is an Executive document, so it is owned by the four parties of the Executive. I know that you are relatively new to the Chamber, Mr Gaston, but you now have eight weeks to consider the document and you will be able to respond in much more detail than you have the opportunity to today.

The document talks about our economy, growing our economy, the fact that we have a unique selling point, reaching for that

opportunity, creating more and better-paid jobs, and regional balance. These are all really positive things that we must reach for. If we are going to lift up everybody in society and create opportunity for everybody, it is important that we grow our economy and do not just focus on the challenges that we have. Of course there are many of those, but there are many more opportunities. The document refers to the fact that we need to reach for those opportunities and grab them on behalf of the people that we all collectively serve.

Mr Carroll: Despite today's opening of the Grand Central station in Belfast, government here still has the lowest spend across these islands on public transport. Hundreds less per head is spent here compared with other regions on these islands. The First Minister spoke of the need to be open and transparent. Minister, I ask you and the Executive to be open and transparent. Will you commit to funding public transport to close that gap?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. The affordability of public transport is a really important issue — it is critical to many people, particularly those who do not drive — and cost is a big factor in trying to encourage people to use more sustainable transport. Investment in our public infrastructure and public transport will be focused on more in the investment strategy for Northern Ireland. There will, therefore, be more detail on that, and I look forward to engaging with him on that.

Ideally, of course, you would want our public transport to be more affordable and to bring those costs down, but there is the issue of sustainability. That goes back to the issue around our Budget and the case that we will make to the Chancellor, this Thursday, around the Budget. As indicated, we want to deliver. The draft Programme for Government has ambition, but that ambition can be realised only if we have the right resources — the right funding and Budget — to allow us to do so. We, of course, will try our best to work within the Budget that we have in order to support families throughout Northern Ireland, but we are limited in what we can do with the Budget that we are given. However, as I said, we will be unceasing in making that strong case to ensure that Northern Ireland gets the fair funding that it deserves.

Ms Sugden: First Ministers, I appreciate that we now have a draft Programme for Government, but I remain very disappointed that there is no mention of older people. The recent census said that we are an ageing

population, which, in itself, will determine the future of our public services, yet we have not considered that in how we move forward. Why was that very obvious group overlooked in the draft programme?

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks to the Member. I know that the Member is passionate about that issue. That is why we are asking you to engage with the draft Programme for Government: help to shape the final version. Everything that is littered across the nine priorities will affect older people; everything that we are trying to do will affect older people. However, it will also affect younger people, so a lot of the issues and priorities are very much cross-cutting. If we need to do something more with regard to referencing older people in particular, let us have that conversation; let us try to shape the end result. There is not a person, particularly in our older population, who will not be impacted on by the issues contained in the nine priorities. The Member is right: we have an ageing demographic. We need to understand that, we need to have public services that can respond to that and we need to have the right supports in place. I am happy to engage with the Member on that issue.

Mr McNulty: First Ministers, your draft Programme for Government states:

"Sport can be life-changing and has the potential to build strong relationships across communities."

That, I agree with. You also reference making progress on Casement Park's redevelopment. Wonderful. In your draft Programme for Government statement, you say that you:

"make no apology for being ambitious."

Will you demonstrate your intent? Will you demonstrate your ambition by committing to the completion of Casement Park — a flagship project and new beacon of hope, reconciliation and prosperity for Belfast, the North and this island — in time for Euro 2028?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. As I have said, I am standing beside the Communities Minister who has primary responsibility for that issue. Of course, I jointly lead the Executive, along with the First Minister, and our duty, first and foremost, is to try to ensure that what we do has, at its heart, the issues of affordability, deliverability and value for money. That is a public duty that we have to discharge.

I agree with the Member that sport is something that can change lives for the better. We want to support our amazing sporting clubs throughout Northern Ireland, not just in football but across many other sports. I know that many of them, even in my constituency, are crying out for much-needed funds. I welcome the fact that the Communities Minister has announced The Northern Ireland Football Fund and that he will do his best to go further in providing support and encouraging that vital need in communities. There are many volunteers and young people involved in sport, and it provides health and mental health benefits and builds a sense of community. I absolutely recognise the value of sport, and I welcome the fact that it is referenced in this document, but, as I have said, the key issues of deliverability, affordability and value for money will always be at the heart of what we do in the Executive.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Ladies and gentleman, that concludes questions on the statement. Therefore, as the next item of business in the Order Paper is Question Time, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 1.55 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework: Update

1. **Ms Flynn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the ending violence against women and girls strategic framework. (AQO 723/22-27)

8. **Ms Hunter** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline when they intend to publish the summary report of the ending violence against women and girls strategic framework. (AQO 730/22-27)

13. **Mr Irwin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the ending violence against women and girls strategic framework. (AQO 735/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First Minister): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 1, 8 and 13 together.

Ending violence against women and girls remains a key priority. We are delighted to say that the Executive approved the strategic framework at their meeting on 5 September. We will provide further information on the framework when it is brought to the Assembly. It will be published along with the first delivery plan and the consultation summary report.

Ms Flynn: I thank the deputy First Minister for her response. What work is ongoing to ensure that there is a whole-government approach to tackling violence against girls and women?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question on this important issue. I know that there has been a lot of anticipation in the sector as it looks forward to the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls strategy being agreed, released and, importantly, implemented. I welcome the fact that the Executive have considered and agreed the domestic and sexual violence strategy, which, of course, will complement and be supplementary to that strategy.

It is important that we have that cross-departmental work. However, this is an issue

not just for the Executive Office, the Justice Department and the Health Department but for all of us, and we can only tackle it together. It is not just central government and councils but communities, families, the Churches and schools and the work to identify the issues and risks and tackle this unfortunately all-too-common issue throughout Northern Ireland.

Ms Hunter: I am aware that the South's first statutory agency for tackling domestic, sexual and gender-based violence will receive €50 million and have over 35 staff. As it stands, is the funding in the North of Ireland adequate or appropriate to the needs of victims of sexual and domestic violence?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: There will be a range of actions under the Department of Health and the Department of Justice's joint strategy, which was agreed by the Executive so it becomes the Executive's strategy. There will be a range of key actions that involve working with the PSNI and other organisations and through those Departments. The immediate actions have been costed. Likewise, in our delivery plan, there will be key actions on training, providing support for the voluntary and community sector, which works with women who find themselves in those situations, and tackling and changing some of the cultural aspects around the attitudes that need to be addressed.

Of course, our ambition goes well beyond what the budget is. We were able to secure a budget through the June monitoring round and this year's Budget. We want to do more, however, so as soon as we are able to get additional budget, we will certainly increase the number of actions. There is scalability in this. As I said, we have a determination to do what we can even though it is a difficult fiscal environment at the moment.

Mr Irwin: The deputy First Minister will agree that addressing violence against women and girls is vital for a safer society. Can the Minister outline what funding, which she mentioned, is available to ensure that the draft strategic framework can be implemented?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. We were able to secure over £1 million for the immediate actions. Two of the key actions will be around the change fund and the challenge fund and will involve work with the community and voluntary sector in the first instance. We are very aware that great organisations that work in that area already exist, such as Women's Aid and Nexus. They do vital work and have, at times, struggled to

secure consistent funding. Those are all issues that we will have to address. We want to support the organisations that are doing that vital work. We want those campaigns. We want to change the social attitudes that can lead to damaging behaviours.

There are stark statistics. Some 19% of police time is spent on domestic abuse crimes, the vast majority of which are committed against women and girls. That is a big problem and a big challenge, and, as I said, we have a determination to tackle it and do what we can, despite the difficult budget situation.

Ms Egan: I look forward to publication of the strategy next week. Are you able to give any assurances that the community and voluntary sector, which co-designed the strategy and worked hard to input into it, will continue to be involved throughout its delivery?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. Absolutely. We will say more about that next week when we officially launch the strategy. It has been a number of years in the making, but it could not have been done without more than 50 partners working in a genuinely collaborative design process. It is the first fully collaborative co-design process in policy development that we have had across any Department, although we have had elements of that before. I pay huge tribute to those people for the volunteer time that they have put in. It is really important that we listen to those who are most impacted and those who work with women and girls in education but also to women and girls who have been touched by abuse and the trauma caused by the activities of others. I am really pleased with the strategy, and I hope that others will be when it is released on Monday. Those organisations will stay involved with the monitoring against delivery.

Programme for Government: Update

2. **Mr McAleer** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Programme for Government. (AQO 724/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: We are delighted that, earlier today, we launched our consultation on the draft Programme for Government (PFG). The draft programme sets out our proposed collective priorities for the mandate. A public consultation on the draft Programme for Government will run for eight weeks, and we invite everyone to have their say and get involved. Following the consultation period, we can agree a clear set of priorities for action.

Mr McAleer: The timing of my question was fortuitous. I note and welcome the cooperation and collaboration that has gone into the draft PFG and is ongoing. Does the deputy First Minister agree that ongoing cooperation and collaboration across all Departments, sectors and interests and, indeed, civic society is crucial to delivery of the PFG?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Absolutely. We cannot continue to work in silos, not least because that can cause duplication and resources to be wasted at a time when we cannot afford that. This has to be collaborative, cross-departmental and cross-agency, but it has to be done hand in hand with the organisations that roll out the programmes. It has to be done in consultation with and with the consent of the people who are most impacted; it should not be something that is done to them by Departments. We are conscious of that: that is where policy development has got to generally, and that is very much at the heart of the Programme for Government.

If we are going to deliver, we will need to work right across the Northern Ireland Executive. We will look to the Committees and the House to help us to shape some of those policy proposals but also with the monitoring of progress and ensuring delivery on the ground.

Mr O'Toole: Earlier, deputy First Minister, I asked for specifics on waiting list reductions, but, I am afraid, I did not get them. Having had a little longer to look through the 80-odd-page document and some of the supporting documents, can I ask you to point to a single, specific new target that the Executive have agreed to in the Programme for Government that is measurable and which the public can judge you by?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. It is an important one that provides a good opportunity to clarify the process. At the moment, this is a draft that is asking people what their view is of the prioritisation. Following the finalisation of that prioritisation, a set of measurements will, of course, be put in place to ensure progress. The Member will see that there is a reference towards the end of the document to the "Wellbeing Framework". There will be a set of indicators that will be based on objective and subjective measurements. That will all be set out: it is live online at the moment. Those indicators may change, however, depending on the prioritisation and rightly so. For each finalised priority there will be a set of indicators that will be monitored. Depending on the reporting mechanism, those will be

monitored month by month, annually or biannually.

We will monitor those for progress against the outcomes set out. I can assure the Member that there will be that monitoring, that assessment of progress, and a budget attached. However, that will follow the finalisation of those priorities. It would be presumptuous of us to assume that those priorities will simply remain after the consultation process.

Mrs Guy: It is crucial for the integrity of the draft Programme for Government, which I welcome, that children and young people are engaged in the consultation. What might actively engaging that cohort look like?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. Of course, we want to listen to children and young people. Sometimes, we say that we must listen to them because they are our future. They will point out, quite rightly, that they are our now and that the issues in the Programme for Government impact on them right now, therefore their views on it are very important.

The First Minister and I met the Children's Commissioner last week, and we raised that issue. We will want to do sectoral engagement in particular. We would encourage young people to participate in the whole range of the consultations and to jump online and participate in that way. However, we will have sectoral engagement with young people — and with older people, which was referenced as well — to listen to their issues and views because that is important.

I welcome the fact that we have decided to do a children's rights impact assessment, which is being released as part of this. Again, it will be interesting to hear the views on that to make sure that we have been looking at all the relevant areas that we ought to look at, and if there are any missing, that is, of course, something that we will address during the consultation.

Westland Community Centre, North Belfast

3. **Mr Kingston** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on securing funding from the Urban Villages initiative for the proposed Westland Community Centre, North Belfast. (AQO 725/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Executive Office officials have developed a range of options on the future of the Urban Villages programme, along with the proposed inclusion of a small number of additional projects to the current capital plan. In total, 58 capital projects are now complete, including 13 in North Belfast. A further 13 projects are being progressed, while four others are being explored. The projects include shared facilities, parks and public realm opportunities.

The principles for a community centre at Westland have been proven and, as the project develops, TEO officials, with Belfast City Council, the Department for Communities and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, will continue to support and encourage the Westland Community Group to develop its capacity and programmes. Westland Community Group has invited us to meet to discuss the community centre, and I hope to take up that offer in the near future.

We look forward to updating Members once we have considered the capital plan and how best to continue with our aim of promoting thriving places and achieving the best outcome for our citizens.

Mr Kingston: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer and for agreeing to meet the Westland Community Group. It is an active and energetic group. Indeed, it has another community fun day arranged for this Saturday, which would be an opportunity to visit.

The previous community centre was a prefab building and was itself second-hand. Since it fell into disrepair, as the deputy First Minister will be aware, the group has been campaigning day and night for a new purpose-built centre. The only thing that I would say would be to urge the deputy First Minister and First Minister to push their officials and the Urban Villages programme to move the project forward to actualisation in as short a timescale as possible.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his follow-up question. Yes, absolutely. I recall speaking to local representatives and the community group, back in the social investment fund days, about the new community centre. There is a real need there and a drive to secure that new building, so I am very pleased that we have confirmation that the Urban Villages project will be able to support that. Obviously, there are a number of processes to be gone through with regard to the business case and exactly what the centre will look like, and in supporting the community group in terms of capacity for the new centre.

I can assure the Member that the first phase of Urban Villages projects is due to come to an end in the next number of years, and we want Westland to be part of that first cohort and completed by that date. There is an urgency now. It is in the last number of projects coming through the business case process. Certainly, I will do everything that I can, and I look forward to visiting, perhaps with the Member, the Westland Community Group.

Mr Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an leasChéad-Aire [*Translation: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer*], especially around what has been done through Urban Villages. Will she outline what has been achieved through revenue funding in North Belfast?

2.15 pm

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. I mentioned the 13 capital projects, but, of course, the revenue schemes have proven to be very successful, with a very healthy uptake. Since the inception of the Urban Villages programme in 2016, over 34,000 people from the North Belfast community have engaged with or benefited from it. A total of 534 training places and 502 workshops have been delivered. Ninety-eight per cent of participants reported that the project had helped them, so that is a really good evaluation for those projects.

You will be aware that the Urban Villages project was very much about doing things differently and really getting down into the community and asking people in the community about the challenges that they face and what issues they would prioritise and then working with communities to find local solutions to local problems. That is why it has been so successful in getting that level of buy-in and participation from the local community. Those are definitely lessons that we need to learn, and hopefully we can move forward with them in the roll-out of other programmes, including the new Together: Building a United Community revised strategy.

Mr Speaker: I call Mark Durkan. I am interested to hear what the Member has to say about North Belfast.

Mr Durkan: Have any lessons been learned in Urban Villages from the Peacemakers Museum fiasco in Derry, where the Executive Office has admitted failures in due diligence, allowing that project to use and abuse the name and image of John Hume against the express wishes of the Hume family?

Mr Speaker: We will move on to the next question, because that does not relate to the original question.

Agri-food Sector: Programme for Government

4. **Mrs Dodds** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration has been given to supporting and promoting the agri-food sector, including the primary producer, in the forthcoming Programme for Government. (AQO 726/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: We are delighted that, earlier today, we launched the consultation on the draft Programme for Government. We are pleased to say that it will plan to support our agri-food sector. The industry is vital to our economy and our rural communities. We will work with our agri sector to support primary production and ensure food security by providing clarity on ammonia controls within planning and promoting sustainable environmental practices.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the deputy First Minister. I must say that I am disappointed overall that the AERA Minister has not had a greater focus on farming, rural communities and the agri-food industry. Seventy to seventy-five per cent of our land mass is managed by farmers. We need them to provide good environmental outcomes. In 2021, £4.9 billion —

Mr Speaker: We need a question, Mrs Dodds.

Mrs Dodds: — of value added was through agri-food. What does that say about the AERA Minister's priority on farming, and will the First Minister and deputy First Minister work with us to ensure that those areas are included meaningfully in the Programme for Government?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her important question about this really critical industry for Northern Ireland. We have a really strong farming community that we all ought to be very proud of in Northern Ireland. Our agri-food products are world-leading and world-class, and that comes from, of course, the application and hard work of so many of our farmers across rural communities. We need to be champions of that.

I spoke recently at the Ulster Farmers' Union AGM and made it clear that, in the Executive, I am here to be a champion for farmers and for our farming community and to rightfully raise

the important issues that they have. We want to support them and need to support them, and that is particularly acute at a time of global supply chain insecurity in relation to our food. Locally, we have great nutritious and high-quality food that is produced in Northern Ireland because of our hard-working farmers, and, in the Programme for Government process, we will want to engage with the rural community, our farmers and the agri-food sector to make sure that the Programme for Government fully reflects their importance to our economy.

Miss Brogan: Does the Minister agree that promoting regional balance should be a key element in the delivery of the Programme for Government?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. Absolutely, we want to deliver for everyone throughout Northern Ireland. In the draft Programme for Government, we want to deliver through that prioritisation, recognising that we cannot do everything in the time frame that we have and with the Budget that we have, but we believe that the nine priorities in the draft document will make a really positive difference to the lives of the vast majority of people throughout Northern Ireland. We want to listen to people's views on that, but it is critical that all nine priorities benefit people equally throughout Northern Ireland and that we take into account the particular needs and circumstances of rural communities and those outside the greater Belfast area.

Ministerial Code: Amendments

5. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when amendments to the ministerial code, expected within 100 days of the restoration of the Assembly, will be made. (AQO 727/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: First, if I may, I will explain that, when the First Minister and I took office, we agreed to provide the Committee with a copy of the first-day brief that officials had prepared before we were appointed. That brief contained references to decisions that, officials anticipated, would be put to Ministers in the first 100 days of the new Administration. They were not commitments given by Ministers. There was some confusion, because the Member referenced it a number of times, and I asked where it had come from. It came from a first-day brief to the Committee and to her as Chair, but it was put together before we were in post. It is and was about what officials anticipated would be put to Ministers. It is important that we clarify that.

In that context, we can confirm that officials are preparing advice to us on revisions to the ministerial code, principally to reflect the amendments made by the Executive Committee (Functions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, deputy First Minister. The renewable heat incentive (RHI) inquiry closed its offices in June 2020, yet, fundamentally, four years on, we still see a lot of outstanding work to implement its recommendations. When will the public be able to have confidence that the recommendations on the code of conduct for Ministers and special advisers will be fully implemented?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: That work is under way, and we expect a submission very shortly.

Victims' Payments Board: Update

6. **Ms Nicholl** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the operation of the Victims' Payments Board. (AQO 728/22-27)

10. **Mr Buckley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the actions they are taking to streamline the application process for victims and survivors applying to the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQO 732/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 6 and 10 together.

As of 2 September, more than £55 million has been paid out by the Victims' Payments Board to eligible applicants since the scheme opened for applications on 31 August 2021. The payments recognise the suffering of those living with permanent injuries.

We understand that there are concerns about the length of time that it can take to process an application. Each application is unique and with its complexities, including the historic nature of much of the evidence required to support the applications. The board is working closely with the victims' groups to keep the scheme under review and look at ways of improving the throughput of cases. We are sure that the board is doing what it can at the moment to minimise delays in the determination process, and we welcome the ongoing efforts to increase the pace at which applications are processed. That is evidenced by the significant year-on-year increase in the amount paid to victims, with that trend continuing into the current year.

We wrote to the Secretary of State in April and May in support of the extension to the backdating deadline, and we were pleased that the deadline has been extended to align with the scheme closing date in August 2026.

Ms Nicholl: Thank you, deputy First Minister, for your answer. One of my constituents has been waiting over 1,000 days for a decision on their application for the Troubles permanent disablement scheme. Every time I write to ask about that, I am told that improvements are being made, but, frankly, he is losing hope. What specific improvements have been made in the past six months, and what hope will there be for the people who are waiting that the improvements will be made?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her follow-up question. My heart goes out to those who are waiting for that much-needed support. There was a huge battle to secure the scheme and get the redress put in place to support people who are living day in, day out with injuries from the past. We want the scheme to work, but, as the Member will be aware, there are a lot of complexities with many of the cases. The scheme has been designed so that, when a person puts in an application, it is not up to them to collect all the information from the statutory agencies. I assure the Member that we have been working with the Public Record Office, the Department of Health and the PSNI to support them with historic records. Many of the incidents are historic and could date back 30- or 40-plus years.

I also assure the Member that we have conducted a business consultancy service review of operational effectiveness and performance. The process aspect of that is to take a look at all the processes involved and make recommendations. That has been done, and we continuously look at how we can speed up that process. We have also been working with victims' groups to improve the experience and the communication, because that is a big aspect of it. If the process takes that long, it is important that people understand where their application is and what will happen with it. You will be aware of the review that the Secretary of State has just carried out of how the process is operated. The situation is far from perfect and is frustrating, but we are doing what we can to speed things up.

Mr Buckley: The Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme continues to be a vital lifeline for many people who were caught up in the absolute barbarity of the Northern Ireland Troubles. That barbarity was brought

into sharp focus recently by the dig for Captain Robert Nairac in a bog in County Louth. Does the deputy First Minister agree that it is vital that anybody who holds information on not only Captain Nairac's remains but those of others of the disappeared, such as Columba McVeigh and Joe Lynskey, come forward to the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains (ICLVR) and allow those families to give their loved ones the Christian burials that they deserve?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: There is a particular cruelty in the loss of a loved one when people do not know what happened to their remains and that really important aspect of having a burial or funeral and to have a place that they can visit that loved one is taken from them. That is a particular cruelty that ought to be addressed.

I agree with the Member and appeal to anybody with information about any of the disappeared or, indeed, any of the violent acts of the Troubles to come forward and give that information to the PSNI. There is still an opportunity to get justice on the basis of new evidence. I encourage all to come forward and give families and those who are suffering what they need and what they should have, which is that respect and closure.

Mrs Dillon: As the deputy First Minister said, the cases are complex and historical. I have two questions. First, can we get information in writing about what exactly has been done to speed up the process? Secondly, given that they are historical cases and that many of the people affected are nearing the end of their life, can we get some reassurances about what is being done to ensure that those people are prioritised in the process?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Yes, I will be happy to write to the Member on that, but I can tell her that the key actions that we have taken are to have a business consultancy service review of operational effectiveness and performance and implementing the learning from that; to explore improvements to the overall victim journey through Capita's assessment process; to hold workshops with victims' groups on improving that process; and to work with the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission (NIJAC) to bring the board up to full complement. A regional model for gathering secondary care evidence is working well, and engagement continues with GPs and the MoD to address issues around medical reports and evidence gathering.

You will appreciate that, once the panel reaches out to some of those organisations and asks for information, they are, unfortunately, subject to the delays that those teams experience. Every organisation is pushed because of its resources, and it is no different in this case. Organisations generally have a team working on retrieving the historical records. That takes time, given their sheer scale. However, I welcome the fact that over £55 million has been paid out. We expect that to roll forward and to continue to speed up, given the changes that have happened.

Mr Gaston: My office has been contacted by victims who have lost loved ones and been denied a pension because they did not see the body in the aftermath of the attack. We have a situation where widows are penalised because their loved one came back to them in a closed coffin. Surely that cannot be right.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The scheme is for the severely injured rather than the bereaved. I, too, have spoken to many of those widows and to those who have been bereaved, and I know that it is a source of frustration that no scheme is available to support those who lost loved ones during the Troubles. There will be people who have had mental and physical injuries due to the death of a loved one, and those people are being considered through the scheme.

It is not ideal at all that there is that criterion. I have spoken to people directly who feel that it is very unfair; it is simply not the way in which psychological injury works at times. However, there is an appeal mechanism, and I encourage people to appeal. In the meantime, we need to focus on how we better support those who are bereaved and try to put in place a particular scheme to support them, as opposed to many having to look at that scheme, which is for severely injured people, and finding that the criterion is not the fit that they need it to be.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: We now move to topical questions.

Independent Environmental Protection Agency

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the fact that a Lough Neagh action plan was published some weeks ago, albeit with mostly non-binding actions, to state whether, when finalised, the Programme for Government will commit to the

creation of an independent environmental protection agency, especially because, although the draft Programme for Government talks about targets, for the life of him he cannot find many binding targets or clear commitments therein. (AQT 481/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. The draft Programme for Government contains nine areas of priority, which outline a number of key actions. It also outlines areas on which, although there is not yet Executive agreement, we propose to bring forward actions. It is important to emphasise that the issues that have not yet been agreed by the Executive will still need to come to the Executive for agreement. There are references to each of the priorities. That is what is out for consultation. Once those are agreed, and once prioritisation is agreed, we will set out how we hope to achieve significant year-on-year progress against those nine priority areas. That will follow the consultation and expand on some of the detail in the draft document at the moment.

Mr O'Toole: We are now getting to the heart of it: clearly, in certain specific and very important areas, there is not Executive agreement. That is fine, but it has taken us a few hours to get to that point.

Something that is not mentioned at all in the draft Programme for Government is the language commissioner and the associated strategy and work. After consultation, and if the Irish language bodies and other interested parties give very strong representations that they would like to see that included, will it be included in an updated Programme for Government?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: It feels a little bit like Groundhog Day, just without any of the fun or entertainment; only relentless negativity. You can have opposition for opposition's sake, or you can have opposition that is constructive. I have looked at the document that he has produced; there is, indisputably, significantly more detail in the document that we have produced.

We are asking for people's views on our nine key priorities. The Member said just a few days ago that a good Programme for Government should have a small number of priority areas. We have set out very clearly that the Programme for Government will not reference absolutely everything that the Executive and Departments are going to do. We have already made it clear that we have agreed the process

in relation to the issue that he referenced. We are waiting for a further submission to be made on the detail of the appointment processes, but that is now in legislation. The commitment is there, and we have spoken about it to the House. There will be many hundreds of other areas and issues that will be dealt with in Departments, or cross-departmentally, or which will be brought to the Executive over the course of the next three years. The Executive's Programme for Government focuses, as he recommended, on a small number of key priorities, which will be measured and will have an attached budget.

Maze/Long Kesh

T2. **Mr Butler** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on any recent discussions or meetings regarding the Maze/Long Kesh site, which, following the deputy First Minister's mention of Groundhog Day in her answer to the leader of the Opposition, is his Groundhog Day question. (AQT 482/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. That is an issue that will have to be discussed in due course. We had the opportunity to speak with the board. A new board has been put in place, which was inevitable, due to the length of time that the previous board served. As I have indicated, anything that happens, or is proposed to happen, on the Maze/Long Kesh site has to be done with full understanding of and sensitivity to the views and needs of victims and survivors, because they are the people who are most impacted by some of the events on that site.

Mr Butler: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer, and I appreciate the answer. As a former prison officer who lost around 32 colleagues throughout the Troubles and in the history of Northern Ireland, I think that that is a good answer. Is there a commitment to unlock the potential of what is probably the most significant development site in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The site is in Lagan Valley, of course, and I would love to unlock its potential. I can say very clearly that, in my role as deputy First Minister, I will never sign up to or agree to anything that would cause offence or hurt to victims and survivors, or risk glorification of any act of violence or terrorism on that site. Those are very much the parameters within which we will operate. Of course, I would like to unlock its potential, but some very good things already happen on the

site. I have mentioned before the incredible growth of the Ulster Aviation Society and the Balmoral show, which, I know, many of you have taken the opportunity to visit. Really great activities happen there, and we need to move forward with discussion and care.

Global Connectivity

T3. **Mr Brooks** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, while welcoming, as the Ministers have done, the focus in the draft Programme for Government on growing the economy, to state what it contains on global connectivity and to encourage further route development from our airports. (AQT 483/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I hope that the Member has had the opportunity to look at the draft Programme for Government, where he will see a number of relevant references. In the general sense, that connectivity is so important to growing our economy. There are specific references, including to looking at how we increase the connectivity and linkages and at the barriers to doing that. It also looks at some very exciting and ambitious ideas, such as extension of pre-clearance in Dublin and trying to reinstate the direct route to the US. The extension of pre-clearance would encourage that; it would all, of course, have to work in parallel and in tandem. We are acutely aware of that, and the Union connectivity report highlighted some of those issues. We will move forward with that, including in the investment strategy discussions.

Mr Brooks: The US has been a vital economic partner for Northern Ireland in foreign investment, and we have our cultural linkages through the Ulster-Scots and Irish diasporas. As we approach the 250th anniversary of United States independence, perhaps the first step to looking at pre-clearance should be to re-establish a transatlantic flight from an airport here. Does she agree that that is a worthy goal that we should work towards?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Absolutely. The loss of that route was huge. The options are still there, and we will pursue all the possibilities that are on the table to try to reinstate it. There will be no point in having pre-clearance if we do not have a direct flight, so trying to secure interest in that direct flight route is important. We have huge foreign direct investment from the US to Northern Ireland. When we speak to US investors, we hear that they want to invest more, and they raise the issue of connectivity and the direct flight. It is a priority for us in trying

to push ahead. If we could secure that, it would be hugely beneficial to our business and tourism sectors.

Economic Business Plan

T4. **Mr Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they agree that the three-year economic business plan launched by the Economy Minister today can be a great game-changer for the local economy and a catalyst for creating more jobs. (AQT 484/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. As he will be aware, I was somewhat involved in the Programme for Government preparations and discussions this morning, and then I was in the Chamber this afternoon, so I have not had the opportunity to look at that consultation. However, in line with the Programme for Government, growing our economy is absolutely key. We talk very much about the prosperity agenda. We have had 25 years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, as amended by St Andrews, in which we have been able to secure peace, if not always stability, and significant improvements and growth in our economy. Looking to the next 25 years, we really need to focus on the prosperity agenda. There is no doubt that having happy, thriving people, communities, families and individuals is the best way of securing a better and brighter future for Northern Ireland.

Mr Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister. I was not trying to take her by surprise, but, on the basis of talking about the future, does the deputy First Minister agree that the Executive and the Assembly parties must remain united in pressing the British Government for fair funding based on need to ensure that people and communities are supported?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Absolutely. We have made clear to the UK Government that we are prepared to play our part in looking at the sustainability of our Budget, to take sensible decisions on the way forward, to look at transformation in order to make our public services, our Departments and their budgets much more sustainable and efficient. We will do that, but that requires investment. You have to invest to save. That is incredibly difficult to do when the Budget is as fiscally tight as it is at the moment.

We will be making that case robustly and strongly to the Chancellor on Thursday when

we meet her. We will be making the case that Northern Ireland requires investment and transformation, support for its front-line public services and the ability for us to reach the ambition as set out in the Programme for Government today.

Farming: Environmental Standards

T5. **Mr Carroll** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they agree that the £260 million announced by the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs a matter of days ago was a missed opportunity not to have strong environmental standards attached to money going out to farmers, given that agri-food was mentioned earlier, and we have to draw a distinction between small farmers and corporate farming conglomerates like Moy Park and others who are breaching environmental standards. (AQT 485/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Member will see from the Programme for Government that the input from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has a lot of focus on environmental issues and targets, but it would be absolutely remiss of us not to recognise the incredibly important role that farmers and our agri-food businesses play in Northern Ireland and that they need to be supported. The majority of our farmers, producers and agri-food companies are small to medium-sized businesses, creating employment for local people, and, as I said, producing high-quality, nutritious, local food. They need to be supported, and they should be supported. We should all be champions of that, and we should all be very proud of our agri-food and farming community here.

Mr Carroll: My supplementary question is on a different matter. Minister, on the winter fuel payment, you said that you are meeting the Prime Minister on Thursday. Will you tell him your concern about more pensioners dying this winter as a result of the cruel cut to the winter fuel payment?

Mr Speaker: Supplementaries are supposed to be linked to the original question. We will move on to Baron Elliott.

Victims Centre, Lisnaskea

T6. **Lord Elliott** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the proposed development of a new centre for the South East Fermanagh Foundation (SEFF) in

Lisnaskea to service innocent victims in the west of the Province. (AQT 486/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I had the opportunity to go down and speak with the South East Fermanagh Foundation just a couple of weeks ago to get an update about the centre. I visited its premises, and there is an absolute need. It does fantastic work with victims and survivors, not just in the Member's constituency but throughout Northern Ireland. It also has a presence in my constituency, based in Lisburn. It supports so many thousands of victims and survivors, so it needs new premises that are fit for purpose.

I am pleased that we have agreed a victims' strategy, which will come to the Executive shortly for agreement. Part of that is a commitment to look at a capital fund to support victims' and survivors' organisations. It has been some considerable years since there has been a capital fund to work with victims' and survivors' organisations, so, hopefully, there will be some further support. The site is still owned by the Department of Education, so the Minister of Education will work with me and SEFF to try to progress that important scheme.

Lord Elliott: I thank the deputy First Minister for that. Can she confirm that capital development for SEFF will be part of that new strategy?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Any capital scheme will be open for application, but, in my view, the capital scheme must be capable of looking at some significant capital works. A number of our bigger victims' and survivors' groups will have a capital need. That will be dependent on budget, and we hope that those timescales will meet the needs, but I know that there is an urgent need with SEFF, and we are happy to work with it to try to identify alternative funding options that can be brought forward sooner rather than later.

As I said, the need is there. SEFF has been working on the project for a long time.

I know that the First Minister and the then First Minister, Arlene Foster, did a lot of work, went down to visit and made a commitment to the business case. We will look at that again and see how we can help to move that forward.

2.45 pm

European Rules and Regulations

T7. **Dr Aiken** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the Brussels office has sufficient resources to deal with the tsunami of European rules and regulations that is coming in our direction. (AQT 487/22-27)

Mr Speaker: You have 20 seconds, deputy First Minister.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: OK. We continually assess the needs in any of those offices. The Member is absolutely right: there is a whole swathe of new responsibilities and new areas to be looked at. There is no doubt that there is a pressure there on staffing time and the capability to assess all that.

Justice

Mr Speaker: Question 13 has been withdrawn.

Online Abuse

1. **Ms Forsythe** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her work to strengthen protections against online abuse. (AQO 737/22-27)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Whilst telecommunications legislation, including the regulation of social media platforms, is a reserved matter, my Department has sought to take a proactive approach to supporting online safety. I sought to influence the content of the Online Safety Act 2023, urging that more be done to address the lack of accountability of anonymous account holders, which is a key issue when seeking to prevent and detect online harms and offences. Recently, I have also met Ofcom representatives to get an update on the implementation of the Online Safety Act and the plans for it to be put into practice.

In addition, the Member will be aware that, previously, I held a round-table forum to take views on tackling online abuse and intimidation, particularly in the light of incidents during the last Assembly elections. In the previous Assembly mandate, I brought forward legislation that strengthened existing law and introduced new offences such as stalking, upskirting, downblousing and cyber-flashing. Those offences have added real, tangible and valuable protections against both online and offline abuse.

I am also mindful of the dangers that are associated with online radicalisation. Young people, in particular, are at risk of being

radicalised through access to harmful online content. I am engaged with law enforcement partners about what we can do to address that risk.

A criminal justice response alone cannot improve online safety. We must take a holistic approach that is focused on prevention and education, as set out in the cross-Executive online safety strategy, which has been put in place to assist children and young people to participate in the online world in a positive, safe and responsible way.

Ms Forsythe: I thank the Minister for her answer and her continued work on the issue. As she mentioned, and as we all know, online abuse starts early in these times where children cannot escape it. Cyberbullying causes huge devastation in schools and society. The Education Minister has introduced a pilot scheme for magnetic pouches in schools to address the impact of phones on children. Does the Minister agree that that is an opportunity for her to work with the Education Minister and support his initiative to help to address cyberbullying and online abuse in schools?

Mrs Long: I am very happy to support any Minister who is dealing with issues of cyberbullying and online harassment, whether in schools or elsewhere. The Member will be aware, however, that I have serious concerns about whether it is necessary to spend £250,000 in order to do so when most schools already have both policy and practice in place to deal with those issues.

Lord Elliott: I thank the Minister for the update. Is the Minister working with other jurisdictions to try to cut out and stamp out online bullying? Is there any cooperation from the owners of websites?

Mrs Long: First of all, if I may, I congratulate the lord on his elevation. I think that it is the first opportunity that he has had to ask a question in this House on that basis.

I am working very closely with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology on the work that it is doing, and with the Home Office on the work that it is doing on radicalisation as well as bullying. Recently, I met my Scottish counterpart to discuss some of those issues, including online safety. The bottom line is that the various platforms have various degrees of engagement, it would be fair to say. Some take a slightly more radical view and view it as essentially a free-for-all, where all is permitted to be said and nothing is out of bounds, whilst

others, I think, try to more robustly enforce some kind of community standards.

For me, the key is that, at times, self-regulation is no regulation, in many cases. Certainly, part of my concern is that, with self-regulation of those platforms, anything that causes controversy also drives traffic on the site and advertising revenue and is therefore unlikely to be curtailed by the people who are responsible.

Ms Hunter: On reflection, the 2022 Assembly election was a prime example of what happens when misogyny meets the misuse of technology, so I welcome the Minister's answers. What conversations has she had with the Electoral Commission about social media abuse and how that can impact on getting more women into politics? Has she had discussions with the social media giants about that abuse?

Mrs Long: I have discussed that with representative bodies of the social media companies, and I am concerned about it. I know from personal experience of women who were interested in getting involved in politics but took a cursory glance through some of our collective social media threads and decided that the level of abuse was intolerable and that they would not expose themselves and their families to it. It is a real issue, and we lose out on a significant talent pool because people feel intimidated and threatened and are worried about their families in that context.

I have not had a discrete conversation about it with the Electoral Commission, but I have spoken informally about the issue to some of the Electoral Commissioners, because they approached me and asked specifically about the impact that it is having on political discourse. Not all of the traffic is driven by legitimate actors. A number of them are not local people criticising our local politicians but are funded from rather nefarious sources, and there seems to be a drive to attack those who speak up for democratic norms in order to undermine them and to intimidate women who try to speak up and raise issues of misogyny, sexism and other forms of hate.

It is important — I reflected on this in a recent interview that I did with a young researcher who is looking into this — that, in the context of Northern Ireland, with all the division that we have, we can show a united front when it comes to that kind of abuse. Irrespective of the party political views of the Member who is being attacked, if people are being attacked because of who they are, how they look or the fact that they are a woman or have any other defining

characteristic, we need to stand united and say that it is unacceptable.

Mr Tennyson: Is there additional legislation that can be used to tackle those who commit offences in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Long: There is. Many behaviours that constitute criminal offending are treated in the same manner, regardless of whether they are carried out offline or online. The provisions of the Online Safety Act 2023 create a range of offences that can be used to tackle and prosecute offensive online behaviour. Additional legislation includes the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the Protection from Stalking Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, the Communications Act 2003 and the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. It is important to recognise that, for example, stirring up hatred is already an offence under the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987. Whilst that may be a dated provision, it is, nevertheless, one that can still be applied and ought to be operated where appropriate.

Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework: Update

2. **Mrs Mason** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her Department's input into the ending violence against women and girls strategic framework. (AQO 738/22-27)

Mrs Long: Violence against women and girls is wholly abhorrent. The stark reality is that, in August, we saw two murders and one attempted murder of women in Northern Ireland in a single week. That is shocking, and we have a collective responsibility to take action. My Department is fully supportive of the ending violence against women and girls strategy, which is, at my request, led by the Executive Office. It was agreed by the Executive last week, and I understand that plans are under way for its full publication. I recognise the key contribution that Justice can make in reducing risk, enhancing protections, improving victim confidence in the justice system and holding perpetrators to account when they offend.

My Department has supported the strategy's development and played an active role in the co-design process. The Minister of Health and I also plan to publish a new domestic and sexual abuse strategy in the coming weeks. That is a gender-inclusive strategy that recognises the impact on male as well as female victims. Women and girls are disproportionately affected

by domestic and sexual abuse, however, so the strategy's implementation will also directly support the delivery of outcomes under the ending violence against women and girls strategy.

Mrs Mason: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, in conjunction with that, what work is ongoing between your Department and the Education Minister on ensuring that any relevant parts of the ending violence against women and girls framework are rolled out across the education system?

Mrs Long: Ultimately, responsibility for cross-departmental working on the ending violence against women and girls strategy falls to the Executive Office Ministers. The First and deputy First Minister will take forward the action plan, which they also hope to publish next week, and it will include the contributions that individual Departments can make.

On the domestic abuse and sexual abuse strategy, my Department has taken other actions to protect victims of violence, such as Operation Encompass, which your colleague Linda Dillon championed when she was on the Justice Committee. That has been very effective in providing better protections and wrap-around support for children who are affected by domestic abuse. We continue to work with the Department of Education on those projects. I look forward to further opportunities to do so, because education is absolutely crucial to changing attitudes. By the time that my Department gets involved, victims have already been created. The further upstream we can go to change attitudes, the less victimisation will occur.

Ms Bunting: The majority of violence against women is perpetrated by men, and men with problems seldom seek help or talk about the issues that they are facing. What work is being done to engage and educate men on those issues and the things that they face that lead them to such behaviours?

Mrs Long: That is a really important point, because many of the men who are engaged in those behaviours have also been victims of abuse, often as children, and have been exposed to domestic violence in the home. Many of them view that as a normal part of an adult relationship. Therefore, the earlier that we can do the education piece and talk about what a healthy relationship and respect look like, the better it will be for changing those attitudes. We all wish that every child grew up in a home where perfect behaviour between parents in an

adult relationship is properly modelled, but, unfortunately, that is not the case. Therefore, if people model their behaviour on their parents', very often they will perpetuate the tragedies of the past.

We work with perpetrators. For example, when we do rehabilitation work, whether in prisons or in the community, with those who have already been found guilty, we will focus on the nature of their offending and the reasons for their offending, and we will take a trauma-informed approach to the work. That already happens.

Also, before people have been convicted of an offence but where complaints have been made, we offer them the opportunity to voluntarily engage with perpetrator and education programmes in order to try to improve things. Performance is much better when someone voluntarily engages with such programmes, but the most important part is catching those people early enough in the system to prevent serious harm. Where it works, it is to everyone's advantage, because it may mean that the perpetrator can go on to have happy healthy relationships in the future, which is to the benefit of everyone in society, not just their current partner.

Mr Butler: What will the Minister do to protect female prison officers, who are often subject to threats of sex-based violence from prisoners, given that the psychological effect is not captured in the staff handbook and sick leave cannot be granted to those women?

Mrs Long: That is a very important point, and it speaks to a recent conversation that I had not just with prison officers but with police officers about the level of abuse that is shown towards people in public service. It is almost taken as read that that is a norm when it should be the exception and treated seriously. If people are engaged in that kind of behaviour, particularly threats of sexual violence or racial abuse, they should be prosecuted. We have to take a zero tolerance approach in the prisons. The fact that somebody is in prison does not mean they cannot offend in that setting. We need to treat that as seriously as we treat violence against the police and others who provide a public service.

One of the sentencing areas that I hope to bring forward in this session is an aggravator model to protect those who deliver a public service or are public servants. I hope that the aggravator model will allow us to reflect in sentencing the seriousness of threatening a prison officer, police officer, member of the fire service, shopworker, bus driver or whoever it might be.

Making those threats is very serious, and making threats that would not be acceptable outside those environments to people who are working in the public sector should not be more tolerable; it should be less tolerable. Those threats affect those people's ability to deliver to and for society. The aggravator model will send out a very strong message.

Mr Blair: I welcome the progress on the ending violence against women and girls strategic framework. I am also grateful for the information that the Minister has given us today on her Department's work on a domestic and sexual abuse strategy.

I am keen to hear more about that. Does the Minister know whether funding will be forthcoming for that strategy?

3.00 pm

Mrs Long: As we have gathered from the announcement today on the Programme for Government, funding remains the most challenging issue that faces the Executive. It is particularly challenging in the Department of Justice and, indeed, the Department of Health, and it is a shared strategy.

Funding and affordability issues remain challenging, and I cannot excuse the fact that that is the case. We will continue to have impact on the scale and pace of delivery within the strategy. However, we have looked at the statutory and contractual commitments and prioritised those so that we can make progress and try to create a programme around the domestic and sexual abuse strategy that is scalable, depending on the funding that is made available to us. However, if we are to recognise the seriousness of the issue — that people are losing their lives as a result of domestic and sexual abuse and that people's lives are being irreparably damaged as a result — we have to let our money follow where our good intentions lead.

Sentencing Bill: Legislative Changes

3. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the expected legislative changes arising from the sentencing Bill. (AQO 739/22-27)

Mrs Long: The sentencing Bill will deliver on a number of recommendations arising from my Department's public consultation on sentencing policy. That will include a statement of the principles and purposes of sentencing; provision to allow further use of community

sentences; statutory starting points for life sentence tariff calculation; expansion and simplification of the current unduly lenient sentence referral provisions; creation of a new offence of assaulting those providing a service to the public or performing a public duty; creation of a statutory aggravator for vulnerable victims; and increasing maximum penalties for offences causing death by dangerous driving. The Bill will also include measures to encourage the disclosure of the location of victims' remains, to be known as "Charlotte's law", and, as indicated in my written ministerial statement this morning, it will include provision for a statutory aggravator for hate crime.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her answer. I note that, in the last week, the Lady Chief Justice has expressed her disappointment that the broadcasting of court proceedings will not be implemented in this mandate. I therefore ask the Minister why that could not be included in the sentencing Bill as it is important, particularly around transparency and public confidence.

Mrs Long: It is important, and it is something that I, too, would like to see. A difficulty that we have is limited resource in the Department and in the Office of the Legislative Counsel for drafting commitments. There is also a challenge in the development of policy in the area. For example, when it comes to the issue of what would be filmed in court, the current view of the Lady Chief Justice is that it would be in relation to Court of Appeal judgements and rulings. However, you will be aware that we saw in England recently, very powerfully, that sentencing remarks are also filmed there. Whilst the pilot looked only at Court of Appeal judgements and rulings, we would want to take a more holistic approach. We would not want to repeal the current rule, which says that all filming in a court is illegal, without knowing particularly the detail of what needs to be done.

One option that I had explored to expedite this is that we could put the repeal, if you like, on ice in primary legislation, as well as taking regulation powers, but only commence it at the point where the regulations were developed and then engage with the sector on that basis. I was advised that that was perhaps not good practice in legislation, which is why we did not proceed down that route, but there may be some things that we can do, even over the course of this mandate, certainly to develop the policy to support that change.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for outlining what will be in the sentencing Bill. I am

sure that a lot of different sections of society will be delighted to see the different aspects included in it. Can you please outline when the Bill will be introduced?

Mrs Long: We anticipate that the Bill will be introduced later in 2025. That will depend on the progress of earlier Assembly business that is going through at the moment. In the next few weeks, I hope to introduce my mixed content, miscellaneous provisions Bill — the modernisation Bill. The sentencing Bill will be the second Bill of the mandate, and then my intention is to have a third Bill that will relate to victims.

An Executive paper is being prepared by my officials to seek Executive approval for the policy content and drafting of the Bill during this term, so that we can get that under way as soon as possible.

Mr Stewart: Minister, the public has lost confidence in the sentencing system, particularly the pitiful sentences for crimes of a sexual nature against women, girls and young people. What more can your Department do to restore public confidence?

Mrs Long: First, that was not consulted on in the sentencing review that was undertaken. Most sentencing in Northern Ireland is based on guideline cases and sentencing guidelines, which are a matter for the judiciary, not the Department. We have limited scope, other than in legislation, to set maximums; the rest is left to judicial discretion. What we have been able to do — I hope that it has shifted the dial with regard to confidence in the justice system in these matters — is work with the Public Prosecution Service (PPS), the judiciary and, in particular, the PSNI on our response to domestic and sexual violence and violence against women and girls. I hope that the strategy that will be laid out on behalf of the Executive in the coming days will further reinforce the fact that the Executive take a no-tolerance approach to violence against women and girls. I hope that that is a message that will be well received by the judiciary.

Places of Worship: Attacks

4. **Ms Brownlee** asked the Minister of Justice what action her Department is taking to address an increase in attacks on places of worship. (AQO 740/22-27)

Mrs Long: I recognise very much the harm that attacks on places of worship can have on members and the wider community. I condemn

the recent attacks at the Bangladesh Islamic Centre in Newtownards, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God at Templemore Street in east Belfast and the Church of the Holy Name at Greenisland and the recent threats to the Belfast Islamic Centre.

My Department works collaboratively with the policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) in addressing crime and fear of crime. PCSPs have a legislative duty to address crime, fear of crime and antisocial behaviour by working collaboratively and engaging with their local community. Specific crime prevention advice is also available from the PSNI. During the recent disorder, the Home Office extended its protection scheme for mosques in the UK, which are vulnerable to hate crime, to provide emergency support. The Home Office also supports the Community Security Trust to provide protection for synagogues across the UK. Protection schemes for places of worship in England and Wales are based solely on vulnerability to hate crime. However, to date, there has been insufficient evidence to show that such a scheme is needed in Northern Ireland. We will, of course, keep that under review.

Ms Brownlee: I thank the Minister for her answer. She touched on the devastating fire that happened recently in Greenisland. What preventative measures are being implemented to educate young people on the dangers and legal consequences of arson?

Mrs Long: I am not directly involved in that. However, it is important to reference the wider issue. We should be encouraged, I suppose, that only about 4% of attacks on what we would call "significant key buildings" — places of worship, Orange halls and GAA clubs — have been identified as being driven by a hate motive. In the majority of cases, they are driven by antisocial behaviour and criminal damage motivations. OK, that is no comfort, if your building is absolutely destroyed in those circumstances, but it shows that deliberate attacks on buildings because they are places of worship are a relatively small part of the overall picture.

It is also important to note that, as part of another piece of work that the Department is doing, we are looking at how antisocial behaviour orders can be used. Also, the Youth Justice Agency was much praised in the recent Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) report for the work that it has been doing to deter youth offending. Therefore, where young people are involved in antisocial behaviour, there are opportunities, particularly

through PCSPs and community engagement, to get the engagement of the PSNI and the Youth Justice Agency before people engage in serious offending. Undoubtedly, however, it is devastating for a congregation to see its church razed to the ground.

Mr O'Toole: Earlier today, Minister, you said that you would not be proceeding with stand-alone hate crime legislation. That comes after a summer of some of the most shocking race hate that the region has seen. I think that many people in ethnic minority communities and religious minorities will feel let down. How can you say that there is not enough time to proceed with a stand-alone hate crime Bill when, today and tomorrow, we will spend hours debating non-binding Executive party motions?

Mrs Long: The first thing to say is that the order of business is not agreed by me; it is agreed by the Business Committee, and all parties have Members on the Business Committee. If people are annoyed about the content of the Order Paper, that is for them to take up with the member of the Business Committee who represents them. However, with respect to the time that I have available to me, as I have said, I am about to introduce an extensive piece of legislation. That is the first one. It has already been prepared. The policy development work has been done, and it is ready to go.

When I came back into office, I realised in February that it would not be possible. It would have been the fourth of a series of five Bills. I realised that that would put it into the next mandate, which I did not want to happen. Before what happened over the summer occurred, before those considerations, I expedited the most impactful parts of that legislation. I have engaged with the sector: the BAME community, the Islamic community, the LGBTQI community and many others who will be impacted by it. Most of them recognise that the most impactful pieces of Judge Marrinan's report are those that create the aggravator and allow additional categories of protected characteristics to be added to the aggravator and those that will provide for special measures in court. We will proceed with the remainder of Judge Marrinan's report in the Department through policy development, because some of it will require cross-departmental working and full Executive buy-in. I wanted to get the most impactful part of it through in this mandate, because I completely agree with the Member that the behaviours that we have seen on the streets of Belfast and other towns and cities across the UK and these islands are not acceptable. It is not who we are or aspire to be.

I want to be sure that there is every opportunity through the courts to make sure that people face the consequences of their actions.

Mr Carroll: Any attacks on places of worship need to be condemned. We have seen a rise in attacks on mosques and in Islamophobia to really nasty levels. Minister, what is your assessment of the fact that the PSNI thinks that loyalist paramilitaries have a role to play in stopping racist violence or that they are not involved in racist attacks themselves? That is certainly contrary to the experience of many people across our communities, unfortunately.

Mrs Long: Mel Jones stated in her public comments that she believed that paramilitaries were involved in some of that violence. She has been clear about that. Irrespective of whether paramilitaries are involved, however, the behaviour is not acceptable. It is important that we all speak with one voice. It is hugely frustrating to see people who come here to serve the community by working in our public services or in private industry to grow our economy or who come here in desperation to seek protection from harm at home being terrorised in their homes and communities instead of being welcomed, respected and treated with dignity. It is completely unacceptable. If my Department can do things in addition to the actions that we already take to provide support, we will continue to explore those with the sectors that best represent those voices and with my Executive colleagues to make sure that it is a joined-up approach.

Mr Dickson: Minister, we saw some appalling scenes across Northern Ireland this summer, with attacks on not only churches and property but individuals. What action is being done by your Department and what conversations have you had to protect minority communities across Northern Ireland?

Mrs Long: As I said, I am committed to playing my part in delivering a safer community for everyone, including victims of race hate crime and in partnership with others in government and beyond. DOJ, the PSNI, the Housing Executive and the Department for Communities continue to jointly fund the hate incident practical action scheme. That scheme allows, in particular circumstances, personal and home protection measures if a person's home has been damaged or if they have been a victim of an incident or crime at home because of their race, sexual orientation, disability, gender identity, political opinion or religious belief. In addition to legislative protections for victims, direct support for hate crime victims is provided

through the Hate Crime Advocacy Service, which is jointly funded by the PSNI and DOJ. It supports victims of hate crime through the criminal justice process and signposts them to the relevant support services and can assist with third-party reporting.

PSNI and crime prevention officers can also provide crime prevention advice. I encourage people who have been affected to keep in contact with the PSNI and ensure that all incidents of crime and antisocial behaviour are reported, no matter how insignificant they may seem at the time. Policing and community safety partnerships also work to identify issues of concern in the local area and to prepare plans to deliver practical solutions.

The recently launched HELPinHAND app is designed to help victims of race hate crime and BAME communities understand the processes of reporting hate crime to the police while providing useful information and details of support. The app is initially available in five different languages.

Building relationships in our community and more cohesive communities, however, is what will really make a difference. A whole-Executive approach is required if we are to tackle this, through the development of a strategies such as the racial equality strategy, the refugee integration strategy and all of the other anti-bullying and hate crime guidance in the curriculum by DE. Working with the Department for the Economy's stakeholders and PCSPs to support victims is hugely important. It is not just a matter for the Department of Justice; it has to be a matter for all of us in our society.

3.15 pm

Mr Speaker: We now move to topical questions to the Minister of Justice.

Hate Crime Legislation

T1. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Justice, given that, more than three years ago, the Marrinan review made it clear that we need stand-alone hate crime legislation and that, in her first-day brief, she confirmed that, while the institutions were collapsed, work had been ongoing to prepare a hate crime Bill and that her legislative programme for the remainder of this mandate would be triaged on the basis of emerging priorities, and given the surge in racist violence in Belfast and beyond this summer and the tragic death of his constituent Anu Okusanya on 24 August, how the U-turn that she announced this morning on her

commitment to introduce stand-alone hate crime legislation is consistent with the standards and the priorities that she set out for herself and her Department. (AQT 491/22-27)

Mrs Long: First, I again extend my sympathy to Anu's family. It is one of the most horrific cases that I have heard. It speaks to us all about the abject terror in which many people in our community are living, because they are so frightened and so fearful of attack, abuse and threat. It is not a unique story in the sense that there are many in our community who no longer use public transport, who do not go out at night and who are afraid to go to work because of the perceived threat against them. That cannot be tolerated.

What the Member suggested as a U-turn has not been so. It has been exactly what I set out. I said that I would triage against emerging priorities. The reality is that, in a three-year mandate, it would be impossible to do a full hate crime Bill, because not all the policy development work was possible in the absence of Ministers, and it will require considerable Executive input, particularly on the public order elements. However, the remainder of Judge Marrinan's recommendations on tackling hate crime that directly impact on victims will be brought forward in this mandate. That was not the original intention in the first-day brief, but, as Minister, I pressed for it, and that has now been accelerated.

To reassure the Member, I have spoken to Judge Marrinan directly, and whilst he, like me, shares a degree of frustration that we cannot move faster on this, he accepts that the two pieces that I am moving forward — the aggravator and the special measures — are the priority for the victims of hate crime. The remainder can then be dealt with in the next mandate.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, Minister. You have emphasised that two years were lost during the suspension of the Assembly, but you are also on record as saying that your officials have been working on your legislative programme for four years. You have emphasised the human resource constraints in your Department, yet your officials have found the time to engage in grandiose spats with the Chief Constable. You have been unambiguous on the need for stand-alone hate crime legislation. Most people recognise that the recent racist violence only amplifies the need for such legislation to be progressed urgently. Do you concede that your U-turn today sends out a very disheartening message to victims of hate crime and that your

money and your mouth are in totally different places?

Mrs Long: Setting aside the rather vulgar framing of the question, to be absolutely clear, my heart, my mind and my efforts are all pointed in one direction, and that is to ensure that we have the best possible law and legislation in place at the end of this mandate to protect victims of hate crime and to give them access to additional protections in court. It is not me who has been engaged in grandiose spats and distraction politics. I have been focused on what my Department can do, and my officials have worked very hard, but, with respect, my officials cannot take decisions on what are controversial issues politically. That requires a Minister to be in place. Therefore, the public order elements of Judge Marrinan's report, which, in many cases, cover the same ground as the report by the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition, for any of you who wish to cast your mind that far back, are likely to take significant effort. I do not want to hold up interventions that will support victims in the here and now by awaiting something that may be essential in my view but that is purely aspirational to other members of the Executive.

Police Morale

T2. **Mrs Erskine** asked the Minister of Justice, given that she will know that morale in policing is at an all-time low, whether she has discussed that with the Chief Constable and, if so, what steps she is taking to build confidence between the police, her Department and the Assembly. (AQT 492/22-27)

Mrs Long: The first thing to say is that I have discussed it at length with the Chief Constable, and his assessment is somewhat different: he believes that morale is much better in the Police Service than when he took over, that things have improved significantly during that period and that morale is improving.

There are a number of aspects to the work that I am doing with the Chief Constable to improve morale further. First, I have looked at the revised environmental allowance for staff. I worked with the Chief Constable and the unions to ensure that there was no strike this summer. We have put in place an interim payment to all members of staff. In addition, we hope to resolve the issue completely at the end of September/start of October, and we are on track to do that.

When I came into office, I instructed my officials to move ahead with the statutory entitlement to

incremental pay, which kicked in on 1 September, irrespective of whether the wider issue of discretionary pay awards could be resolved in that time frame. Every officer will get at least part of their pay settlement sooner rather than later, with the remainder to be decided once Executive pay policy is in place.

I have also sat with the Chief Constable at length to go through a business case for stabilisation and recovery, which will have to go to the Executive for approval. I am very encouraged by the interest in policing that has emerged over the summer, and I look forward to the full support of all parties in the House for those plans.

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Minister for her answer. I have always supported policing, and I have always wanted to stand up for our police force in Northern Ireland. They are the people who protect our communities and help to support people in them. The Minister outlined a number of things that she has been doing, and I appreciate that. In that context, therefore, does she agree that adequate funding and increasing police numbers would support and help to create better morale? Does she support the Chief Constable, a man who is passionate about his workforce and who is trying to invest in them and fight for them, who took steps to request more funding and support over the summer?

Mrs Long: At the end of the day, it is about working with the Chief Constable through the structures that we have. The reality is that, in a devolved institution, the money that comes to Northern Ireland is not hypothecated. It is for this Assembly, on the basis of recommendations brought by the Executive, to vote through a Budget and decide how we spend our money locally. That is the reality of the situation. Even were the Chief Constable to be successful in lobbying Westminster, that money would come to the Department of Finance, and it would be for us around the Executive table and in this Chamber to decide where it ended up.

The important thing is that I work closely, as I have been doing, with the Chief Constable to build the strongest possible case at the Executive table, so that funding that comes to Northern Ireland makes it into the Department of Justice's budget. To date, that has not been the case. I can give a tangible example of where a £22 million investment was due, if you like, to the Department of Justice for COVID recovery. Less than £6 million of that came to the Department of Justice; the rest was absorbed by the Department of Health. If we

continue to act in that way, my Department and the PSNI will continue to be underfunded. That is not a situation that you or I would wish to have in place. We need to work together to make a robust case. I agree that increasing officer numbers would be helpful, and that is part of the stabilisation process that we are now engaged in. In order to increase numbers, however, we have to first increase finances. We have to put the current service on a sustainable footing.

The other thing that will help morale is ensuring that where officers are attacked in the street, or where they are pelted in riots, that is taken as seriously by the PPS and the courts as any attack on a member of the public. It affronts me, frankly, when I hear it reported, for example, that 40 people and four police officers were injured in a riot. Those four police officers are also people: they have families, and there are consequences. We need, more and more, to stop accepting that the police should be there as some kind of battering ram for society. We need to protect them, and I am hopeful that the legislation that is coming through next year will achieve that.

PSNI Funding

T3. **Mr Martin** asked the Minister of Justice, given that she has just acknowledged the immense pressure that the PSNI is under, whether she has considered reconfiguring other budget areas in her Department in order to release or divert additional money to the PSNI. (AQT 493/22-27)

Mrs Long: I understand that the Member is new to the House, and I welcome him to his place. Anyone who has been here for slightly longer will have heard me make the same case over and over again. We have a projected overspend this year of £34 million in-year: that is for the things that, we know, will crystallise, so that is inescapable expenditure. We have another couple of hundred million pounds sitting off to the side, waiting to crystallise, and, if that happens, we will have significant challenges. I have had to ask every part of my Department to make savings. This is not unique to the PSNI. Every single part of my Department is operating on less resource than it would ideally have, and the overall share that the PSNI has had of the Department's budget has not really changed.

Let me just put this in context: if I fund the police at the expense of probation, more people will go to prison and we will need more money for prisons. If I invest in policing at the expense of prisons, we will have to start looking at early

release similar to England because we would not be able to manage our prison numbers. If I invest in policing at the expense of the courts, the police will be arresting people but there will be no opportunity to get them before the courts and have them charged and tried.

I have a job to do that is different from that of the Chief Constable. His job is, of course, to advocate for policing. My job is to advocate for policing and justice. It is a complete system, and we need a holistic approach. Those cases have worked best when we all — the judiciary, the PPS, the Department, probation and the Police Service — have been in the same space, arguing the same case for the same issues. That is how we got the cross-departmental and cross-sectoral funding that allowed us to do COVID recovery.

Mr Martin: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she stand by the letter from her permanent secretary to the Chief Constable admonishing him for asking for additional financial resources directly from the Prime Minister? Did she have sight of the letter before it was sent, and does she support its contents?

Mrs Long: The role of the accounting officer is the one role that I, as Minister, do not have oversight of in my Department. In fact, it is the reverse. It is the accounting officer who oversees my directions on expenditure, so I am not sighted on his correspondence in his role as accounting officer. Also, to be frank, the leaking of that into the public domain has not been helpful because it has created a very false narrative of the relationship between the Department and the Chief Constable and between myself and the Chief Constable. That relationship has been very strong.

Before we have a debate on this later, I remind Members that at the Policing Board as recently as last Thursday, the Chief Constable said that he wished to draw a line under this. So, perhaps if we are so concerned about policing and the Chief Constable, we might want to take his advice.

Policing Board: Review

T4. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister whether, given that the Ormeau Road incident was the catalyst for the review of the Policing Board, with Mr Justice Scofield deciding that "MJ" in the former Chief Constable's day log relating to the incident referred to "Justice Minister", she is considering recusing herself from the process to scope the review. (AQT 494/22-27)

Mrs Long: No, I am not, for the simple reason that it was clarified at the Policing Board, though I accept not during your term of office, by the then Chief Constable that it did not relate to me and that I at no time engaged with him to either advise or pressure him on the actions that he took.

Mr Chambers: Minister, do you not think that there is enough doubt to undermine the process, and that, for transparency, you should do the right thing as there is certainly a perceived conflict of interest?

Mrs Long: To be clear, your colleague, who is now the Health Minister, supported this on the Policing Board during his tenure there and was content with the approach that was being taken.

There is no doubt in my mind. At no time have I sought to influence the Chief Constable on operational matters. In fact, I am regularly castigated in the Chamber when I refer to the tripartite arrangements and the fact that I cannot encroach on operational matters. So, no, I will not be recusing myself. There is no doubt in my mind. I suggest that you speak to your colleague Mr Nesbitt. Perhaps he can remove any doubt in your mind.

Places of Worship: Attacks

T5. **Mr Kelly** asked the Minister to outline any recent British Government engagement on the Home Office scheme to provide additional security measures at places of worship and to clarify whether she is unable to pursue the scheme here because of the number of attacks that are classed as antisocial behaviour and, if so, to state whether something else can be done in the North. (AQT 495/22-27)

Mr Speaker: We have less than a minute, Minister.

Mrs Long: There are a number of strands, so perhaps it is best, given the restricted time, that I write to the Member. There is a security for mosques scheme that the Government run, which is available to Northern Ireland. There is also the Community Security Trust, which deals with synagogues.

We do not have a scheme that is comparable to that in England and Wales. That deals only with places of worship that are affected by hate crime, and only 4% of attacks on churches or other notable buildings in Northern Ireland are hate crime-related. The majority are antisocial

behaviour. I will pop an answer to the Member in writing, if that would be helpful.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Justice. Members should take their ease while we change the top Table before the next item of business.

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

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Consideration Stage

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance, Dr Caoimhe Archibald, to move the Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

Moved. — [Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance).]

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. No amendments have been selected for debate at Consideration Stage. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the Bill's 10 clauses for the Question on stand part, followed by the Questions on the three schedules and the long title. That is as clear as crystal, I am sure.

Clauses 1 to 10 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 3 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Private Members' Business

Policing Resources

Mr K Buchanan: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports the Chief Constable in his campaign to secure additional resources for the PSNI; notes with growing concern the serious pressures facing local and neighbourhood policing, crime investigations and rank-and-file officers as a result of chronic underfunding; highlights that the Chief Constable and his officers have a statutory responsibility to protect life and property, preserve law and order and prevent the commission of offences; deplores recent correspondence issued by the Department of Justice criticising the PSNI's efforts to secure extra funding from the UK Government; shares the Police Federation's view that this was an attempt to gag, embarrass and chastise the Chief Constable; calls on the Minister of Justice to apologise; and further calls on the Minister to urgently recommit to reversing the decline in police funding and police officer numbers.

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

Mr K Buchanan: I welcome the opportunity to open the debate on the case for additional policing resources. The Democratic Unionist Party stands with the Chief Constable as he continues to make the case powerfully for additional resources for policing in Northern Ireland. In tabling the motion, my party and I understand the strain on the current PSNI budget and the need for a budgetary increase to ensure community safety and combat crime in all its forms.

Each of us is seeing growing pressure on neighbourhood policing, crime investigation and community PSNI officers in our constituencies. It is deeply troubling that the Justice Minister has endorsed attempts to undermine what was an entirely legitimate request for extra support from the Prime Minister.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I thank the Member for giving way. Will he point me to where I endorsed any such attempt to gag anyone?

Mr K Buchanan: Minister, you can respond when you have the opportunity; maybe you will feed back in your comments. Did you support the letter from the permanent secretary to the Chief Constable?

Mrs Long: Is the Member happy to give way? As I made clear, it is not a letter that I would be sighted on in the course of my duties.

Mr K Buchanan: OK. The Minister can obviously feed back later, if she has had time to reflect, on whether she is supportive of the letter that was written. Whether she saw the letter or not is irrelevant: did she support it?

I will continue. The role of the Chief Constable includes being the accounting officer for the Police Service of Northern Ireland. In light of that, the Chief Constable was entitled to make approaches to the Prime Minister on the financing of the PSNI. Funding of the PSNI involves the interests and responsibilities of not only our devolved Government in Stormont but the Westminster Government. It is the Chief Constable's role to ensure that he has a significant investment to increase police officer numbers and to allow him to ensure that we have a visible, accessible, responsive and community-focused service.

For some time, the PSNI has warned of the pressures facing its finances as a result of years of underinvestment, but those warnings have been largely ignored by the Department of Justice and the UK Government. Funding in England and Wales between 2010 and 2022 increased by 20%. By comparison, the PSNI budget has gone down slightly. Over the same period, inflation was at 36% and, consequently, the PSNI budget has decreased.

At a meeting with the Northern Ireland Policing Board in April 2024, the Chief Constable said:

"My focus is now firmly fixed on securing an improved budget settlement for policing. For too long, officer and staff numbers have been allowed to decline, along with the supporting infrastructure. Policing is at the heart of any functioning society and needs to be given adequate priority in funding decisions both by the NI Assembly and Department of Justice."

He also highlighted the following:

"Despite the NI Block growing ... the police budget has fallen from £903m to £892m, without any adjustment for purchasing power or inflation. Whether intentional or otherwise, the reality is that the priority of policing has been eroded and this inevitably comes at a cost to services."

The Chief Constable should be commended, not chastised, for his action to date. As well as the forthright approach that he has taken to the challenges that his organisation faces, Jon Boutcher is well known and highly respected in UK policing and has a strong relationship with Ministers and officials in Whitehall. Why, then, should he be expected to hide his light under a bushel and not use every tool at his disposal to advocate for the best outcome for Northern Ireland?

In recent weeks, I had the opportunity to complete a weekend ride-along with officers in Magherafelt. That gave me an opportunity to understand at first hand the many issues facing our local officers. The trip around Magherafelt started at 7.30 pm and ended at around 2.15 am on Saturday night/Sunday morning. Thankfully, there was little action that night, but it was a great opportunity to have a one-to-one conversation with two officers for the entire night in the back of a police car. We were heavily flak-jacketed up, but it has to be done, and it was good to get an understanding of what the PSNI faces nightly. I recommend anybody to do it.

The Chief Constable and his predecessor have highlighted to the Policing Board stark warnings about the impacts of cuts on front-line policing in Northern Ireland across the political spectrum. Concerns have been well documented and recognised. We believe that the Chief Constable was right to seek additional funding from the Prime Minister and the UK Treasury, and that is not at all the position held by the Northern Ireland Executive. It is also crucial that the PSNI has the necessary resources to combat the ongoing threat from dissident republicans who still seek to unleash terror in our community. A significant proportion of the police budget is made up of additional security agreed with the UK Government. The idea that it violates protocol or principle for the Chief Constable to advocate for additional resources from the UK Government is therefore baffling; in fact, it would be remiss of him not to raise those issues at the highest levels of His Majesty's Government.

I am sure that we all agree that there has been chronic underfunding of policing and public

services in Northern Ireland and that that must be addressed. We will continue to press the Government to tackle those challenges and to urge others to support that crucial message, not to undermine it. We hope that the Minister will reflect on the damage caused by her Department's intervention in this case.

An advantage has come from this difficult situation in that it seems to have sparked more constructive engagement by the Minister with the PSNI on the Chief Constable's proposed recovery plan for rebuilding officer numbers. Let us be clear, however, that that should not have required public anger at the Minister and her Department's attitude towards the Chief Constable and his attempt to secure the necessary funding.

The PSNI has statutory obligations to protect life and property, maintain law and order, prevent crime and bring offenders to justice. The DUP will always side with the Chief Constable in his efforts to uphold the rule of law and build safer communities across Northern Ireland. Last week in the House of Commons, our party leader, Gavin Robinson, urged the Prime Minister to provide a funding package to alleviate the current pressures on the PSNI. That is where the focus of the House should be.

The amendments proposed by the SDLP and the UUP are in keeping with the spirit of our motion. The focus on increasing additional security funding is especially relevant, as that has plateaued in recent years and no longer reflects the challenges facing officers and our citizens from dissident republicans. Those gangs exert criminal control over many of our communities.

Mr Durkan: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after "offences;" and insert:

"strongly disagrees with any rebuke about the approach of the Chief Constable to the Prime Minister; re-endorses the recommendation in the Patten report that the number of full-time police officers should be 7,500, with the ambition of increasing that number further; endorses the Chief Constable's assessment that, since 2010, the policing budget has experienced a fall in real terms of 29%; and calls on the Minister of Justice, the Executive and the British Government to work with the NI Policing Board and the PSNI to urgently provide the funding to comprehensively address these structural deficits in the 2024-25 financial year and the subsequent years of this Assembly mandate."

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

Mr Durkan: I welcome the opportunity for the Assembly to discuss and debate the hugely important issue of policing resources. I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board.

Recent events have laid bare and made worse the dire budgetary situation in which the PSNI finds itself. For years, we have read the reports and heard the warnings, although some of us may have chosen not to hear them. Now, however, everyone sees and feels the effects and impact of sustained underinvestment in policing. Whether for the policing of racially motivated rioting in Belfast or of recreational rioting masquerading as republicanism in Derry, reinforcements from elsewhere on these islands have been required. Our Police Service has had to request assistance, through mutual aid, to restore and maintain order on our streets and to protect people and property. Our thoughts are with the officers injured during the disorder, and we wish them swift and full recoveries. Our thoughts are also with their colleagues, who are under-resourced, overstretched and at constant risk of attack, injury or even worse, as they do their job every day and night to protect and serve the community.

It is not only in the highly trained public order crews that we do not have as many officers as we need; successive deficit Budgets have ensured that that is the case across the Police Service. We see cuts to neighbourhood policing, making areas feel less safe, and cuts to traffic policing, making our roads less safe. Response times to calls are getting slower, and investigations have to be prioritised against one another and are taking longer. That undermines not just the efforts of good police officers but the community's confidence in policing. In some areas, that confidence has been hard won. In other areas, including my constituency, there is still a long way to go to build confidence in the new beginning to policing, and that will be 100 times harder if we end up with a Police Service that can barely perform its basic functions because of budgetary shortfalls. In some areas, there remains antipathy and downright opposition to policing, despite the progress that has been made. The hangover from historical issues — the legacy of some negative actions by the RUC during the conflict — has not been shaken off, and there are criminal paramilitary organisations that are only too happy to exploit that. It is made much easier for them to do that if and when the police are not able to respond

to ordinary everyday calls about burglaries, antisocial behaviour and road traffic collisions.

3.45 pm

While the bleak budgetary landscape of the PSNI is often proffered as an explanation, it sometimes feels to people like more of an excuse. It allows those with alternative, sometimes less-than-honourable, motives to portray the police as uncaring and for them to try to assume the mantle of protectors of the community themselves. It is not just good people and victims of crime who will notice a reduced police presence and a reduced capacity to respond to calls; the bad guys will too. We cannot leave communities vulnerable and people prey to the coercive control of criminal organisations. Therefore, it is not just obvious but essential that we come together and work together to support every effort and initiative to attract extra funding from whomever or wherever we might get it.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the Justice Minister's often-touted commitment to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable is in contrast to her Department's public excoriation of the Chief Constable's acting in accordance with that operational independence?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that intervention. I think that the Justice Minister addressed or attempted to address some of those issues and will do so again later in today's debate, but I understand where he is coming from.

We understand and support the efforts of the Executive to extract further and fairer budget settlements from Whitehall. The holes in our Budget, be they for policing, health, education or housing, did not appear overnight. We will not be found wanting in pushing the UK Government to fill those holes, which they have been leaving us with for years. However, the Chief Constable obviously felt that the case that he and his predecessor had been making to the Executive for policing was either not being listened to or not landing. His decision to go straight to the Prime Minister was, I assume, borne out of frustration and sheer desperation. Who better to outline the stark realities of the state of policing and the stark danger of not giving the PSNI not just the funding that it wants but the funding that it needs to protect life and property, preserve law and order and prevent the commission of offences? He should be supported, not silenced. As our amendment

states, we disagree with the rebuke that he received, including its tone and timing. While the letter bore the signature of a senior civil servant, it is hard not to suspect that, despite the Minister's very recent assurances, it had the fingerprints of maybe more than one Minister on it.

Our amendment removes the call on the Justice Minister to apologise. It is not that we do not think that she has questions to answer. In fairness to the Minister, she has answered some of them already, and I am sure that she will answer more as the debate proceeds. However, we are not going to use the issue to score political points. It is far too important for that. This is something that we should be united on, not divided on. Our focus should be on getting more resources, growing police numbers and working together with the Executive, the UK Government, the PSNI and the Policing Board to do so. We need to make good and go beyond the pledges in 'New Decade, New Approach' and the promise of Patten in terms not only of police numbers but of the representativeness and effectiveness of the Police Service. There is a lot of work for us to get on with. Let us get on with it.

Mr Chambers: I beg to move amendment No 2:

Leave out all after "chastise the Chief Constable;" and insert:

"calls on the Minister of Justice to apologise and to urgently recommit to reversing the decline in police funding and police officer numbers; and further calls on the UK Government to urgently commit to increased, ring-fenced funding for the PSNI through the additional security funding mechanism to stop the decline in police numbers and to support the Northern Ireland Office on matters of national security."

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Alan. Likewise, you have 10 minutes to propose your amendment and five minutes to wind.

Mr Chambers: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker.

In September 1999, Chris Patten delivered his report and recommendations on the future of policing in Northern Ireland. If he were to present a report on where policing is 25 years later, would he be satisfied with the progress, and would he award an A* grade for how his recommendations have been taken forward? I

suspect not. He based his recommendations on the number of police officers on an assumption that the peace gained by the Good Friday Agreement would become the norm, with the proviso that any upsurge in violence would lead to an increase in police numbers. There is no doubt that our society has moved beyond the daily mayhem of indiscriminate bombing and the wanton murder that terrorist murderers inflicted on all of our people. However, on occasions, live ammunition is still being fired towards police officers with no regard to who may fall victim to such actions. Petrol bombs and bricks are still being thrown at our police officers, and many of those officers still feel the need to check under their cars every morning for explosive devices planted by those who refuse to move on. Would Patten, 25 years on, feel that there is a surge in violence that might warrant an upward adjustment on his recommended police numbers?

What did Patten recommend in 1999? He envisaged a Police Service made up of 7,500 full-time officers supported by 2,500 locally recruited part-time reservists to police the peaceful situation that, he hoped, the Good Friday Agreement would produce. What is the current position on policing numbers? The Chief Constable reported last week to the Policing Board that the numbers stand at around 6,300, with just a handful of part-time reservists. Of that 6,300, he currently can deploy only 4,500 officers on the streets due to illness and injury. Chief Constable Boutcher has a statutory duty to protect life and property, to prevent crime and to bring those who break the law before the courts. He is accountable to deliver and is judged by how effectively he does so. He needs more officers, and, to recruit and train new officers in numbers that outstrip the natural wastage of officer retirements, he needs more budget. What did he do? He wrote to the Prime Minister directly, pleading for more resource and referencing the national security crisis for additional budget from the Government to cover the situation. My party applauds him for taking that direct action and rejects any ham-fisted attempts to silence him. I was pleased to hear him informing the Policing Board last week in a determined and robust manner that no one will stop him fighting for what he considers a just cause that is very much in the interests of the Northern Ireland public and of the service and the officers that he commands.

Our amendment calls on the Minister to not just be a cheerleader for the police but do more to reverse the decline in police funding and police officer numbers, and I commend it to the House. In doing so, my party pledges our continued full support for the Police Service of

Northern Ireland and the efforts of the Chief Constable in highlighting what he needs to increase the level of service that he wishes to deliver and that, he considers, all the people of Northern Ireland deserve.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Alan. I inform the Assembly that the amendments are mutually exclusive. If amendment No 1 is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Kelly: First, let me declare an interest as a sitting member of the Policing Board.

I think that it is fair to state that the vast majority of Members, if not all Members, will agree that there are unprecedented resource difficulties for the PSNI. A Police Service with a minimum need of 7,500 police officers that is sitting at approximately 6,400 and is losing 300 officers annually through retirement is unsustainable and unacceptable. There are substantial gaps at all sections and levels of policing, as was mentioned. It is perhaps witnessed most readily in local areas, where the number and visibility of neighbourhood and local police officers has diminished drastically. There is a recruitment plan to increase the number of officers over the next three years to 7,000, but, of course, that will require funding.

The fact is that the North has been vastly underfunded. A decade and a half of Tory austerity has been a disaster for our public services. It has had a significant impact on our health and social care system, our education system and, of course, policing, to name just a few. The current British Government must change tack from their predecessors and properly invest in public services. The Finance Minister, Caoimhe Archibald, supported by Executive colleagues, has led the efforts in calling on the British Government for further investment in public services. The four-party Executive and the Assembly have collectively called on the British Government to address the underfunding of the North so that we can meet the needs of our people. It is important that we continue to work together constructively in pressing the British Government in that regard.

In that context, calling for a ministerial apology or accusations of gagging attempts by the Justice Department are not constructive. I was at the Policing Board meeting on Thursday, as were a number of other Members. I listened carefully to the public session with the Chief Constable, which was being streamed live. Jon Boutcher was forthright in his views. Let me quote some of his words. In summary, he said:

"In drawing a line under the issue, I am delighted to announce that I and my team are working collectively and positively with the Minister, the permanent secretary and the Department of Justice preparing a business case for the recovery of the PSNI police officer numbers."

The Chief Constable went on to welcome and acknowledge the Justice Minister and permanent secretary's support in drawing up the recovery plan, and he signalled his intention to work with them in that regard. There is no demand from the Chief Constable for an apology. Sinn Féin wants to see proper funding for the recovery of police officer numbers, and we will continue to work constructively, collectively and positively with other parties in the Executive and the Assembly in calling on the British Government for proper investment in our public services. I encourage the authors of the motion to do the same.

Mr Dickson: Northern Ireland has come a great distance since the Good Friday Agreement. An integral part of that process has been the foundation structures put in place regarding our devolved governance and, particularly, our ability to determine and legislate for ourselves and determine our future. A signal step forward in that process was the devolution of policing and justice.

We are all aware that protocols are in place, and nowhere are they more sensitive and important than in policing. There is clear guidance and rules that Departments and Ministers must follow, for good reason, and Members of the House would be the first to criticise if they were breached. No one is more alert to those rules or, indeed, sympathetic to the Chief Constable's concerns than the Justice Minister. She has repeatedly raised the issues with Executive colleagues, the Justice Committee, successive Secretaries of State and Prime Ministers. The systematic raiding of DOJ's coffers, which, in turn, has depleted the PSNI, over the last eight years is the reason why the crisis is here. Other parties that have been in the Executive over that time must take their share of responsibility for the current situation in which justice and policing now finds itself.

The Chief Constable is, of course, free to speak with whomever he chooses. However, the mechanisms for allocating funding, resources and accountability for the police and, indeed, for all arm's-length bodies are clearly set out in the rules and guidance and cannot be circumvented. The Executive will ultimately

decide and determine where additional resources are allocated, and, for them, the case for additional funding must be made. On more than one occasion, successive permanent secretaries in DOJ have reminded this Chief Constable of those rules.

The role of the accounting officer has been framed in the most recent letter as an attempt to chastise or gag the Chief Constable by one permanent secretary. That is disingenuous and seeks to sensationalise the routine business of a Department and, most importantly, the responsibility of an accounting officer. It is sad and regrettable but not unsurprising that the correspondence was leaked. Now, it must become a theatrical performance being played out in public and in the Chamber, rather than a genuine attempt to recognise the serious funding situation in which successive Executives have put the DOJ and the PSNI.

4.00 pm

I note that the motion frames the letter as an attempt to embarrass. The letter was a private communication. The leaking of the letter was the attempt to embarrass and score cheap political points. We all agree that the PSNI needs additional funding. The Minister has reiterated that on numerous occasions, not just in the House but in her actions and correspondence. The issue of the amount of money that is allocated to DOJ, which, in turn, funds the PSNI, has been raised continually by the Minister, me, as my party's justice spokesperson, and my party colleagues in the Assembly Chamber. When debating the Budget in April, Minister Long outlined the challenges that the Justice Department has: our high prison population and our low police officer numbers, coupled with a forecasted 30% increase in legal aid payments.

When you make the comparison with other Departments, such as Health and Education, both of which have had budgetary increases of 70% and 45% respectively over the past 12 years, and consider that the DOJ budget has increased by only — let this sink in — 3% in the same period, you have to conclude that those parties that absconded from the institutions of government bear the ultimate responsibility for the current situation in which we find ourselves. Our current budget situation has been brought about by 14 years of Tory rule, stripping public services, including the police, to the bare bone, coupled with the gross failure of those parties that brought this place down on more than one occasion. Services and budgets take time to rebuild, and the Chief Constable is well within his rights to ask for more to deliver.

The Minister and her Department are working with the Chief Constable and the PSNI to make the case for increased funding. Indeed, as recently as last Thursday, the Chief Constable said that he wished to draw a line under the matter, yet some in the Chamber still want to make mischief. The Minister has continued to push the Executive and raised all those issues with the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State. We will see what their Budget produces and whether they will keep their promises.

A more realistic focus for a motion might be to call on the Executive to support a plan for the PSNI recovery that the Minister of Justice is working on. It is regrettable that Members have chosen today to focus on political point-scoring rather than practical solutions.

Ms Brownlee: I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. I suppose that the motion is slightly ironic, given that it is Emergency Services Day. On a day when we acknowledge, respect and honour the service of the PSNI, we are here to address a matter of critical importance to the PSNI. It needs the necessary resources and investment to keep our communities safe and, of course, to allow our police to police.

Chief Constable John Boutcher has made a strong and, of course, legitimate case for additional funding. That is not about bureaucracy; it is purely about protecting people. Our police officers work tirelessly to safeguard our communities, and they need the tools and support to do that effectively. The DUP stands behind the Chief Constable in his leadership efforts during these very difficult times. It was very troubling that the Justice Department had supported efforts to undermine the request for more resources. At a time when the PSNI faces unprecedented pressures, unity is crucial. The Minister should reconsider her stance and restore public confidence by supporting the Chief Constable's call for that funding.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Ms Brownlee: Yes.

Mr Dickson: I hear what the Member says about the Minister's responsibility. Will she explain how her party is supporting the PSNI, which she has said, loudly and proudly in the Chamber, it does. What action has her party's Ministers taken in the Executive to deliver that funding for the PSNI?

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

Ms Brownlee: Thank you.

Of course, I take that point. The DUP has made it very clear that we are underfunded and need resources. That is the situation, point-blank. We need that. We need continual investment in our Police Service. There is no doubt that every member of my party wants to see that and wants to us funded correctly, purely for the safety of our communities in Northern Ireland.

For years, the PSNI has warned of the impact of that chronic underfunding, but, unfortunately, those warnings have often been ignored. That has resulted in less visible, less responsive policing in Northern Ireland. That situation is neither justifiable nor sustainable, and we need bold action from our leaders and the Department to address all the challenges.

Our police officers who have been injured in the line of duty and forced into ill-health retirement also deserve our full support. It is unacceptable that they face difficulties in receiving their injury on duty award and the retirement benefits that they deserve. Those brave individuals have sacrificed for our safety, and we must ensure that they are treated with respect and care.

I welcome, of course, the Chief Constable's recent announcement that a business case will be developed to recover policing in Northern Ireland. That is an important step forward, but more must be done. We must ensure that the PSNI is fully funded to tackle everyday crime, antisocial behaviour, the ongoing threats, complex preventative work and, of course, engagement. The Chief Constable should be commended for his efforts in his leadership to secure the right resources for effective policing. His advocacy is not only appropriate but necessary, and it is essential that we stand together in support of the PSNI, ensuring that it has the financial firepower that it needs.

The chronic underfunding of policing and public services in Northern Ireland must be addressed. The DUP will continue to press the Government to tackle those challenges, and we urge others to support that crucial message.

Miss McAllister: As a point of clarity, I highlight the fact that I am also a member of the Policing Board. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue today. I do not think that it is ironic, given the day that is in it, because we should speak about our emergency services and applaud them for their work, so I welcome the opportunity to do so. This is the second time in

recent days that we have had the chance to speak on the issue. Indeed, the Chief Constable, as Members pointed out, spoke at the Policing Board last Thursday about the importance of the issue and updated the board on the work that the police are undertaking in conjunction with the Department of Justice. As Members highlighted, he wishes for the false narrative around relationships to just be put to bed.

As a member of the Policing Board who sits on its resources committee alongside many colleagues in the Chamber today, including, in particular, the proposers of the motion, I have heard from the PSNI finance team that the finances are unsustainable and have been for some time, much like those of other public bodies. I respect the fact that all those meetings are held in private session, so it is not easy to hear everything that goes on behind those doors, but one thing that is said time and again is that it is not just the PSNI that faces difficulties but all public bodies. The PSNI team recognises that, but that does not mean that it should not fight for the appropriate resources.

The Department of Justice budget, however, as many Members mentioned, has not been adequately resourced for many years. Thanks to FactCheckNI, which has published a public profile of the Department of Justice budget, everyone can access it to see for themselves that, since 2011 and with inflation, the NI block grant has grown by 52.3% compared with growth of only 12.8% in the Department of Justice's budget. That means that, in real terms, it receives less funding than it did a decade ago. Despite that, as the Minister mentioned at Question Time, the PSNI continues to receive a large chunk of the DOJ grant. Whilst other Departments have seen an increase, the DOJ has faced limitations that directly impact the PSNI's ability to protect and serve. However, those limitations are not specific to the PSNI, and, at Question Time, the Minister outlined the fact that, if you give to one, you must cut from another. Policing is just one element of the justice system. We need to ensure that the entirety of our justice system is adequately resourced.

Unlike the proposers of the motion and the amendments, we are aware of the legal obligations that are placed on the accounting officer of the Department of Justice and the Chief Constable and of the reality of devolution. Let us face it: we know that the letter was not the only correspondence from the only permanent secretary in the only Department to remind people of obligations. However, it is important to work collectively — let us face that

— and the Minister has said many times, in response to motions before the House and at Question Time, that we are not adequately resourced. We must also recognise that no Minister here would accept that bodies such as the Education Authority or the Housing Executive are funded separately from the Executive. They are funded through Departments, and that is why working together is so important.

We do not buy the faux outrage today as a result of the leak of the letter, because, if we were to buy —

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member is the second member of her party to reference the "leaked letter". Is the Member not aware that the letter went to more people than the Chief Constable? Indeed, it went to the chair of the board, which means that it was shared with every independent and political member of the board. It is like one of those letters that went to Uncle Tom Cobby. There is nothing about a leaked letter, and it is wrong to put that into the public domain, given that the letter went to more people than the Chief Constable.

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

Miss McAllister: Thank you.

I thank the Member for his intervention. I recognise that the letter was a "reply all" in the instance in which the Chief Constable initially wrote. I highlight the fact that I do not believe that the media were on the "reply all" list, but I can clarify that later, or perhaps the Minister can. We know that the letter was leaked and the reasons why. It made the DUP, the UUP and, certainly, the SDLP open their eyes to see and put on their listening ears to hear about the resources that the PSNI needs.

In Alliance, we are fully aware of the financial context in which we find ourselves. We know that the block grant is inadequate; we know that the PSNI is not fully resourced, and our Minister has said that time and again. However, when the Executive had more money to spend, they never sought to prioritise policing and justice. Do the DUP and the UUP regret that now?

Furthermore, as a member of the Health Committee for the Alliance Party, I say that the hypocrisy of the UUP on the issue permeates through not just its amendment today but the policy of the previous Minister and current Minister. How many police hours are wasted

sitting in A&E with vulnerable patients because those patients cannot get access to mental health services? How many police calls are made by children's homes, parents or caregivers because social services have failed them? How many deaths due to alcohol or substance abuse do the police attend because the health service has let people down, because no UUP or DUP Minister has prioritised that area? How much time and resource is spent by the PSNI on dealing with drugs in a vacuum not of its own making? It is another example of how Health needs to work with the Department of Justice but has failed to do so. We support the Justice Minister and the Chief Constable in their ongoing work to work together to ensure that the PSNI and the entirety of the justice system are fully resourced.

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

Miss McAllister: Thank you.

Ms Bunting: Being a Chief Constable of the PSNI has never been a position for the faint of heart, and that is especially the case at present, although not entirely for the traditional reasons. The service is beset by the perfect storm: poor morale, the lowest numbers in its history and an appalling and unsustainable financial position with services repeatedly cut year-on-year. The harsh truth, which we have acknowledged but perhaps not actioned as much as we might, is that the PSNI has faced unsustainable cuts for many years, and now we — not just "it" but "we" — are at a crisis point, because, if it cannot do its job as a result of cuts of an unprecedented and cumulative scale, it does not merely impact the organisation; it has consequences for our communities, our society and indeed the very safety of our citizens and nation. Neither we nor our neighbours in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland can afford for Northern Ireland to be the weak link in national security or those crimes that cross borders, jurisdictions and county lines.

The Chief Constable came before the Justice Committee earlier in the year, and he was very clear that the situation was unsustainable. He advised that, at that time, the police were handling over 500 calls a month on behalf of the Ambulance Service and were in receipt of 42,000 calls a year about concerns for well-being and safety and that the PSNI has the highest sickness levels in the UK, and that is in the context of the budget for policing in the Republic of Ireland increasing by 25%.

The police are involved in much more than crime, which has also hugely increased in complexity. The service is now increasingly engaged in safeguarding and public protection. Let us remember the financial context: unlike any other police service in the UK, it is not permitted to hold reserves or to borrow money and is expected to plan for the long term on a year-to-year budget. Everything has consequences. Even before this unprecedented crisis, the PSNI had been feeling the effects of the losses. It has tried to absorb as much of the cuts as it can, but now the services are starting to change, and our constituents are noticing. Neighbourhood services have been extensively cut, and prior to that, there was already a dearth of detectives, and I should not have to spell out what that means.

Northern Ireland is one of the top three safest places to live in the UK but for how long, if this continues?

4.15 pm

We have rehearsed in here numerous times that there are many in the justice system undertaking the roles of healthcare professionals in order to alleviate the pressures in that sector and that there are many who should be receiving treatment rather than incarceration. Just how far are we from "Right person, right care"? The Committee for Justice plans to conduct a mini inquiry into the extent to which the justice system is being used to alleviate pressures in healthcare.

The Chief Constable is left in the unenviable position of trying to balance his legal and statutory obligations as an accounting officer not to overspend but balance the books with his legal and statutory obligation to keep people safe. With the current budget, it is not possible to do both — something has to give. It is not the first time in recent history that somebody in that role and situation has been reminded of those obligations and to be careful. That brings us to the infamous letter.

I do not know Jon Boutcher extremely well, but I have observed him sufficiently to know that the Chief Constable is a savvy political operator not necessarily parochially in Northern Ireland but across the UK. He knows the protocols well. He is an extremely experienced chief. Therefore, one can only assume and conclude that such is his concern and frustration that he raised the issues at the highest level of government and in the circles in which he mixes. Was that the right way to go about it? Perhaps not. Was it the right and necessary thing to do? Absolutely.

What option does he have? Everybody here already knows the situation, and no tangible difference has been made. Where else is he to go but straight to the top? The Prime Minister, as a former human rights adviser to the Policing Board, should still be reasonably au fait with the PSNI and its issues. This is not the time for ego, protocol and procedure. It is absolutely the time for collective voices, using every influence we have, to get the moneys that we need to protect our citizens and deal with those who commit crime.

Public safety in Northern Ireland should be the utmost priority for all concerned. What is it they say about desperate times calling for desperate measures? One could be forgiven for thinking that a few noses are out of joint because the Chief Constable has more and better connections and access than they do. As I said when the matter was first exposed, the financial situation of the PSNI is dire and the consequences severe for wider society and public safety. The Chief Constable would be remiss were he not to raise those issues at the highest level of His Majesty's Government. The letter may have come from the permanent secretary, but the question remains as to whether the Minister stands by it. Other than an assertion of dominance, what is to be achieved by a public admonishment of the Chief Constable?

In conclusion, I am well aware —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Your time is up, Joanne.

Ms Bunting: — that the PSNI already absorbs 65% of the departmental budget, that every part of the system is struggling and that the Minister has genuinely little room for manoeuvre.

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

Ms Bunting: That is all the more reason why collective voices taking the case to Treasury and the PM are essential and to be welcomed.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: This is Peter Martin's first opportunity to speak as a private Member. I remind the House that it is convention that an inaugural speech is made without interruption. However, Peter, if you choose to express views that provoke interruption, you are likely to forfeit that protection, so you are warned. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Martin: That is terrifying. *[Laughter.]*

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: It is scary biscuits. Away you go.

Mr Martin: My goodness. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I feel that you have just taken off my Kevlar, which, perhaps, has some relevance to what we are talking about.

I start my first speech by thanking the Member of Parliament for North Down, Alex Easton, for my place on this Bench. I also wish Alex's wife, Denise, well, as she recuperates in South Africa from unexpected surgery. In all honesty, I do not consider this to be my seat until I win it at an election; of course, that will be up to the people of North Down. My constituents know from their experience that I have a strong work ethic, and I have, hopefully, built up a reasonable reputation as an on-the-ground councillor.

I take the opportunity to pay tribute to my mum and dad for their constant support and their wisdom for the name that I got at birth. My father and grandfather were both named James Alphonsus Martin, so I narrowly body-swerved being called after Saint Alphonsus de Ligouri, the patron saint of moral theologians. Thankfully, I got simply "James". I thank my wife Melanie, who has had to endure the ups and downs of political life for 14 years, and our three children, Lucy, Sam and Zach. If I did not get their names in, my life will not be worth living when they watch this later. They mean the world to me. Lucy, at 13, is a political animal who can explain the single transferable vote or d'Hondt as well as anyone in the Chamber. Sam, at 11, is a skilled cricketer and rugby player. Our third child, Zach, is best described by a T-shirt that he likes to wear, which simply reads, "Admit it: life would be more boring without me".

It will come as a shock to no one in the Chamber that I am a proud and unashamed unionist, but that solely, in itself, does not define me. I have personal faith in my Lord, who wants me to treat people with dignity, respect and compassion, regardless of their background or political allegiance. I care passionately about the children in this country, and it makes no difference to me whether they are from east or west Belfast. I am concerned about the vulnerable: those struggling to make ends meet at the end of the week; the elderly, who feel increasingly isolated; and, perhaps, the most vulnerable of all in our society — the unborn child — who has no voice.

I turn to the debate in hand. I have had a number of police officers contact me in the past week, and, when the debate was tabled,

several more contacted me over the weekend. I have heard from a range of ranks. They have highlighted to me the immense pressure that the service is under, the additional hours that they have to work and the stress that that puts on them and their families. They have said to me that they have been appalled at this political debacle that has unfolded over the past number of weeks.

It was a simple series of events. The Chief Constable wrote directly to the Prime Minister for additional financial resources, and we have talked about it this afternoon already. My colleague said that that was maybe not the procedural way to do things, but it has certainly engendered some debate and discussion about PSNI funding. That then prompted the permanent secretary in the Department of Justice to write a letter admonishing the Chief Constable or, to use the words of the Police Federation — the body that represents the rank-and-file police officers that we have been talking about in the Chamber — to "gag" and "embarrass" the Chief Constable. I do not know the Chief Constable, but, from what I have learned about him over the past few weeks, I suspect that he is not easily gagged, and more power to him, because he has the welfare of the people who serve and protect all of us in the Chamber and anyone who happens to be watching this live feed.

I am not going to talk about the macro issues of the Budget. Mr Dickson talked about the accounting officer and accountable officer. During Question Time, the Minister answered a question from me about funding and mentioned that, if we in the Chamber got the money, it would go to the Executive; it would not go directly to the PSNI. Do you know what? That is probably true. However, Treasury could ring-fence that money, and the Executive would have to take cognisance of Treasury's — I see the Member shaking his head — ring fencing of the money.

That is not really what concerns the police officers whom I have spoken to. One said to me, "If Justice actually got the money, would it send it back? Say the Chief Constable had been successful in getting the additional funding, what would Justice have done?".

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Peter, your time is up.

Mr Martin: Thank you very much, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Thank you for your lenience and the Kevlar.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: You are more than welcome. The next Member to speak is another Peter — Peter McReynolds.

It is not. I call Eóin Tennyson.

Mr Tennyson: I want to make a number of observations about the debate that has taken place this afternoon, because this is an important issue. Policing and justice funding is something about which this party has been raising the alarm for many years, if not beyond a decade. The first observation is the number of Members who have either misunderstood or, more likely, seem to wilfully misrepresent policies around managing public money and the role of an accounting officer, which is one of the few roles that a permanent secretary has that sits outside political direction and control. In any organisation, a healthy tension between accounting officers is necessary to ensure good governance. It will, therefore, be custom and practice in every Department to have debates with their arm's-length bodies around the management of public money and protocols and rules of engagement. Indeed, if a Minister acts in a way that is counter to the policies set out in 'Managing Public Money', it is the permanent secretary who will rebuke the Minister. The idea that this is a political issue fundamentally misrepresents the issue at hand and, more than that, is dangerous. The protocols are in place and the roles of accounting officers exist in order to ensure good governance. When we start to politicise those in a disingenuous way, it erodes trust in not only the institutions but our ability to deliver that good governance. That attitude explains the cavalier approach to cost controls and the management of public money that we have seen from parties in the Chamber in the past.

It is also important that we reflect on how we got here, because the funding challenges did not emerge over the summer or fall from the sky. Some of us have been warning about them for years. Westminster austerity has been mentioned, and that is correct. Public services have been underfunded by Westminster, but I will take no lectures on that from those who not only propped up the Conservative Government but championed some of their most destructive policies.

It is true that our public services have been starved due to Northern Ireland's being funded below relative need. It was this party in December that made the argument that the Fiscal Council's assessment did not adequately take account of policing and justice spend. When we reflect on why policing and justice has been squeezed since ring-fencing ended — for

the Member's information, justice spend was ring-fenced after devolution for five years — we see that, since then, it was not the Alliance Party but successive Executives led by the DUP and Sinn Féin who squeezed the justice budget, despite our warnings, because we were a small party in the Executive at that time. You cannot now come crying to the Chamber about the inevitable consequences of your actions.

To give credit where it is due, the current Finance Minister recognised and sought to rectify in the most recent Budget the scarring impact that underinvestment in justice has had. The Ulster Unionist Party, however, railed against it and said that all the additional money that had become available should have gone to health, in which case policing and justice would have been in an even worse position.

Let us get real about this: politics is about choices and priorities. It is about actions, not words. It is all well and good to come to the Chamber and decry a letter that has been sensationalised in order to cover your own blushes when we are in a situation that is entirely of your making. I commend the Justice Minister for the work that she has been doing behind the scenes and wish her and the Chief Constable well in securing the additional resource needed for our Police Service. I look forward to unanimous support from every party in the Chamber when those bids come forward in monitoring rounds and in the next Budget.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: As this is Timothy Gaston's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that the convention is that an inaugural speech is made without interruption. However, if you choose to express views that may provoke an interruption, you are likely to forfeit that protection.

Mr Gaston: Certainly, I will take the opportunity in my maiden speech to highlight two seismic events that have taken place in my constituency of North Antrim since the Assembly last sat in July. Our tourism pull has been greatly strengthened after the hidden jewel of Gracehill's Moravian settlement was awarded UNESCO world heritage status, joining the Giant's Causeway in being awarded that prestigious title. I pay tribute to Dr David Johnston and the Gracehill Trust. Their vision and years of dedication and work towards preserving and restoring the 1759 Moravian settlement has led to that historic award for the village.

I turn to my predecessor: the new honourable Member of Parliament for North Antrim, Mr Jim Allister, the "dead-end unionist" who brought 54

years of the Paisley dynasty in North Antrim to an end and a man of principle who stood the test of time and has been dead right in his analysis of the sinking sand on which Stormont is built and the dangers of the protocol. Whilst many in the Chamber will not want to admit it publicly, Jim leaves the House a poorer place. He will be missed for his attention to detail and the level of scrutiny he has brought to the Chamber since first being elected in 2011. Yes, it is a daunting vacancy to fill, but I take refuge in and rely on the verse:

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

That is where my faith will remain.

4.30 pm

The motion raises a number of important questions for the Justice Minister. Chief among them is why, when questioned by any Member about any aspect of the PSNI, the Minister decrees that it is an operational matter and that the question should be directed to the Chief Constable. Yet, when the Chief Constable takes the case for funding for the PSNI to the head of the UK Government, he is reprimanded by the most senior official in the Minister's Department. Does the Minister agree with what her permanent secretary wrote? We are looking for a simple yes or no answer.

Before coming to the House, I served for five years on my local PCSP, and I know all too well about the pressures that the policing budget is under. I hear the frustration of many constituents who tell me that they cannot get police officers when they need them. Likewise, I hear the frustration from PSNI officers who simply do not have the resources to deliver the service that they want to be able to offer the public and that the public rightly demand. Throughout my time as a councillor, I worked closely with the police on many issues. Indeed, I frequently raised the issue of rural crime, which is a blight and a scourge on many of our communities.

I would be failing in my duty as a public representative if I did not take this opportunity to highlight the fact that there are a number of things that the PSNI spends its money on that, I believe, are not prudent. I think, for example, of the LGBT+ Network that receives funding from the PSNI budget. Staggeringly, the network has been permitted to use the police's internal email system to promote revision classes, notes and interview preparation for promotions that are available only to officers who identify as

LGBT+. Unsurprisingly, when asked about that, the Equality Commission reminded us that it is unlawful for any employer to discriminate against its employees on the grounds of sexual orientation. I welcome the fact that the PSNI found reverse gear on the issue, albeit only after it came under pressure.

Also, the PSNI needs to be mindful that continuing to pander to certain groups is increasingly creating a crisis of confidence in the unionist/loyalist community towards the police. I suspect that there will be those in the House who will not want to hear this, but it is nonetheless true that it is inconceivable that a PSNI officer would fly a Union flag or an Orange standard out the window of their squad car. Yet, when that happened with a GAA flag, it was not only excused but positively welcomed by some in the Chamber. A PSNI squad car cannot perform doughnuts in the road while using the siren inappropriately and waving a divisive flag out the window one day without undermining the authority of officers to pull over a young lad for similar driving offences the next.

Mr McNulty: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gaston: Yes.

Mr McNulty: There is nothing divisive about an Armagh flag.

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

Mr Gaston: That is the Member's personal view. Members from the unionist community have a different take on that, Mr McNulty.

We all want to see the chronic underfunding of the PSNI addressed, but my party and I also want to see the police putting their current resources to better use, as well as addressing, as a matter of urgency, the crisis in confidence that widely exists.

Mr Carroll: We desperately need to invest in our health service, hospitals, GP services, mental health provision, and drug addiction and rehab services. We need to invest in schools to provide pupils with the best opportunities and to improve the lives of so many young people affected by educational underachievement. We need to invest in our welfare system to overturn the two-child tax limit and other cruel welfare reforms that have condemned so many to a life of poverty. We need to invest in public and community services across the board to provide people with a better standard of living. We need to invest in housing and to end homelessness.

We need to invest in workers' wages, tax the rich and redistribute the vast wealth in our society in order to eradicate poverty, social alienation and the destitution forced on so many by this Government.

Crime emerges from those social problems. Desperate want causes mental ill health. Poverty and inequality cause people to steal. Deprivation leads to violence. It is under the crushing economic policies of Stormont and Westminster that sectarianism and the racist violence witnessed in recent weeks grow and fester as working-class people turn on one another over the failures of the state. Lack of income and lack of access to housing, healthcare and the basic necessities of life are the problems, and we cannot police our way out of them.

There are no prizes for guessing why Executive parties seem more concerned about policing resources than fixing the problems from which crime grows. It is because the Government feel that it is easier and cheaper to police working-class communities than to deal with the social ills that they face. In communities where one in five children lives in poverty, it is easier for the PSNI to stop and search people and to intimidate, harass and police them than it is for the Government to grasp why it has to be this way. Poverty, lack of opportunity, alienation and crime are not inevitable, but throwing more resources at the police is definitely not the answer. That is why I will not be supporting the motion.

The problem goes much deeper. If we are talking about additional resources, we should ask what those resources are for and who exactly will be policed as a result. If we look at the record of the PSNI, we will have our answer. It is a police force that is rife with misogyny, with one report citing widespread misconduct, including sexual predation, misogyny, domestic abuse and the use of misogyny in social media groups. The same PSNI has actively discriminated against black and ethnic minority communities and attempted to criminalise the Black Lives Matter movement. It is the same institutionally racist police force that reports migrants who are victims of crimes, including domestic abuse, to the Home Office.

It refused to act appropriately on racist violence, allowing far-right thugs to rampage in south Belfast, and then had the gall to tell us that loyalist paramilitaries, under the guise of community leaders, have a role to play in stopping racism. Amnesty International, one of the world's leading human-rights organisations, tells us that people from ethnic minority

communities are almost twice as likely to be stopped and searched by the PSNI. Think about that for a second: twice as likely. In 2022, Amnesty International reported that Irish Travellers were the ethnic group most targeted for stop-and-search. In 2021, journalists from "The Detail" revealed that, over a five-year period, the PSNI stopped and searched twice as many Catholics as it did working-class people from a Protestant background. That is the two-tier policing that is worth talking about, but sure throw more money at the problem anyway.

Not only does the PSNI risk the safety of young people through the use of child informants, it continues the horrendous practice of strip-searching children. Last year, we heard that 27 children were strip-searched in 2021. For those who do not know what that entails, those children were arrested and asked to remove their clothes by the police, with just one child being accompanied by an appropriate adult. What was found as a result of those blatant abuses of children's rights? In 24 of 27 cases, nothing, zero, zilch.

Mr K Buchanan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will, yes.

Mr K Buchanan: The Member is scathing of the police. If he is in trouble tonight and rings 999, who will he ask for?

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

Mr Carroll: Well, it depends what the problem is. The Member needs to clarify his example.

It is funny that the Member's party always talks about protecting children, often under the guise of undermining relationships and sexuality education (RSE), but when it comes to stopping and searching and harassing young people and the police's use of powers on young people, there is, unsurprisingly, not a word.

To continue, one search uncovered a mobile phone and two a small quantity of drugs. When it comes to investigating the most serious crimes, such as murder by the state and its paramilitary proxies, the PSNI has been to the fore in denying families justice and covering up Troubles-related crimes that were carried out by its predecessor organisation.

I will also not vote for any motion that commits more resources to a force that continues to fire plastic bullets at working-class children, be they

in Sandy Row, the Ormeau, the Falls or the Shankill. Again, there is nothing from the party next to me when it comes to protecting those children and young people.

The PSNI has serious problems, but resourcing is nowhere near the worst of them. It has problems with misogyny, racism, sectarianism, state violence and the heavy policing of working-class communities. Instead of committing more resources to the police, we should commit them to improving the lives of oppressed people who find themselves in an inescapable cycle of crime thanks to the policies of this Executive and previous and current Westminster Governments.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister of Justice will respond to the debate. Minister, you have 15 minutes.

Mrs Long: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to be able to address these issues in the House today. As other Members have mentioned, it is Emergency Services Day, or 999 Day as it is, perhaps, better known. I begin by paying tribute to every officer and member of staff who works for the PSNI. From first responders, administrative staff, cleaners and call handlers, each person is playing a role in helping to keep our community safe.

Policing is a difficult and challenging job. We rely on the PSNI to protect us from harm 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and they do so at considerable cost to themselves. It is, therefore, truly appalling that police officers, whose job it is to keep people safe, come under attack from rioters who are intent on inciting hatred and terrifying communities. Those people offer nothing to our community, and I condemn their actions unequivocally and am disappointed that not all Members would do so in the terms that I set out.

I take this opportunity to place on record my thanks for their bravery and resilience to those officers who were involved in policing the riots and disorder. A total of 40 police officers were injured as a direct result of that disorder, some quite seriously, and I wish each of them a speedy recovery. It can never be acceptable that the police are subject to such violence, and we cannot become desensitised to its impact on individual officers and their families, on morale in the service and on the delivery of policing in our community. I also pay tribute to the Chief Constable for his strong leadership during that period and to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS), the judiciary and the courts for their strong response.

Members may be aware of the fact that the additional unfunded costs that were incurred for policing the riots and disorder are in the region of £2.75 million and are in excess of requirements for normal policing operations. Given the level of pressures facing the PSNI and the Department of Justice, those costs are not affordable from within existing budgets. Similarly, the level of financial pressures at block level mean that the Executive are not in a position to provide the funding that is necessary to meet those additional costs. It was, therefore, agreed at an Executive meeting in August that the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Minister of Finance and I are going to write jointly to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland seeking the additional funding to cover the PSNI's costs. That letter is now with TEO and DOJ colleagues for clearance.

The fundamental issue at the core of the motion is the chronic and long-term underfunding of the justice system. I have been consistent in raising that since first becoming Justice Minister in 2022, following on from previous Justice Ministers, including David Ford, who raised it as early as 2014. As a result of that underfunding, the PSNI is under-resourced and officers and staff are under extraordinary pressure due to falling numbers. While that pressure is significant even when things are calm, it is compounded when there is unrest such as that which we witnessed over recent weeks, especially when that unrest is dispersed across Northern Ireland. Those levels of pressure on policing are unacceptable, and I welcome the work that the Chief Constable, the Policing Board and my officials did to manage the challenge and address stabilisation — a project that we have been engaged in consistently since my return to office.

The motion asks that I, as Justice Minister:

"recommit to reversing the decline in police funding and police officer numbers".

It is a matter of record that I have consistently and robustly raised the underfunding of the entire justice system relative to other Departments with Executive colleagues, successive Secretaries of State and Prime Ministers and in the media. I trust that, given the motion and the various amendments, I can now rely on all parties to commit to properly resourcing policing and justice, because that has simply not been the case to date.

While the total Northern Ireland block grant has increased by 52% in the 13 years up to 2024-25, DOJ has seen only a 13% growth in budget

allocation. Health and Education have seen their budget allocations grow by just over 80% and 50% respectively over the same period. In real terms, the Department of Justice's 2024-25 budget is around £326 million below where it would be if it had simply kept pace with inflation. I give credit to my officials, who are being dragged through the mud here today. Had we had that purely inflationary uplift, we would, because of their prudent management of the finances, be within budget every year because we have no overspend, taking in even extraordinary expense.

The position that the PSNI and the wider justice system are now in is a direct result of budgets being continually squeezed over many years and disproportionately when compared with other Departments. Put simply, neither I nor the Chief Constable can spend money that we do not have. Similarly for the Executive: more money for other Department inevitably means less for policing and justice. That is just simple mathematics.

4.45 pm

Northern Ireland has failed to keep pace with investment in policing and justice in comparison with elsewhere in the UK. The situation that the PSNI finds itself in is a direct consequence of that. I have also raised the need for more investment with the Secretary of State and Prime Minister on a number of occasions, and I will continue to do so not only for Northern Ireland in general but specifically for policing and justice, where, I believe, there is an inherent structural weakness at this point.

The Finance Minister, in her engagement with Treasury, has been clear and robust in highlighting the need for further investment in public services across Northern Ireland, and she continues to advocate on behalf of the Executive for the proper funding of our public services. I will support her in her efforts to address that historical imbalance in funding for justice and policing, and I will support the First Minister and deputy First Minister in their endeavours to raise those issues. That we speak with one voice is perhaps the most important thing if we are to have any impact whatever when we deal with Treasury and the Government.

I want to be clear that it is not the case that we are choosing not to allocate additional funding to policing. That funding simply does not exist. In the recent urgent in-year financial exercise, my Department reported total pressures of £275 million to the Department of Finance. That included £45 million for day-to-day stabilisation

pressures; £2.75 million for additional unfunded policing costs following recent disorder; and £227 million for exceptional pressures relating to the PSNI data breach, holiday pay and McCloud injury to feelings. Every effort has been made and continues to be made by my Department to reduce the level of those pressures, but that has not been achieved without adversely impacting on the justice system.

In the absence of additional funding being allocated to my Department in the October monitoring round, extremely difficult decisions on prioritisation and service provision will continue to be required to manage the remaining pressures. Any further actions taken by my Department to live within its budget, if implemented, will inevitably result in a slowing-down of the justice system, including the work of my Department on developing new policy and legislation, and that will compromise our ability to preserve life, protect the public and keep people safe. People need to understand that these are literally matters of life and death. This is not an academic exercise. The number of police officers that we have, the amount of time that we can commit to the justice system and the amount of money and resource that we have need to be taken seriously, if people are genuinely concerned about the state of policing and justice.

I fully appreciate the current resourcing pressures faced by the Chief Constable. Police numbers are now at a record low, and that is compounded by high levels of absenteeism that are often due to sickness, stress, injury, long working hours and heavy overtime and can be accompanied by significant numbers of officers on reduced duties. When I was previously Minister, we worked with the Chief Constable and encouraged him to consider recruiting again in 2022. He chose not to do so, as is his choice. We are now in a situation where we need to engage in that recovery process.

One of the priorities in 'New Decade, New Approach' was to increase officer numbers to 7,500, but no additional funding was provided to enable us to realise the whole figure. Indeed, we gained some additional funding, which got us to 7,100 officers, but, because it was not baselined, that immediately fell away after that number had been achieved. It is not that efforts have not been made; it is that they have not been sustained. The figure of 7,500 officers is not a new one. It was noted as far back as the Patten review of policing in 1999, though I caution people because we have to remember that there have been changes in operations in the PSNI. Every officer, as part of a

transformation process, has been given a handheld digital device so that they do not have to spend time going back to PSNI headquarters. All sorts of transformation has gone on, and that should put us in a position where the same number of officers can achieve more.

There is also an issue with the upward trend in population that needs to be held against that, so we need to bottom out what the actual figures are. However, it is an academic exercise at this point, because we are so low now that to get anywhere near a figure that would not be controversial will take us at least this mandate. The Chief Constable and I have agreed to put a pin in what the ideal figure should be, work on that in conjunction with officials to bottom that out but focus on how we build recovery into the system right now.

To put it into perspective, as of September 2024, the current service headcount is 6,355 police officers. Police officer numbers are historically low, and, without additional funding, it will not be possible for the PSNI to recover and grow as, I hope, all of us in the House would wish. My officials continue to work closely and constructively with the Chief Constable and his team to build a robust case for the funding required to stabilise policing in the immediate term and to develop a compelling business case to increase police numbers over the next three years. Once that work has been completed, I will make the case to the Executive for additional funding for that purpose, but it will be the Executive who decide whether that business case is funded. It would require a change in legislation and a significant change in practice were we simply to accept the ring-fenced funding, as some suggest, and hypothecation directly from Westminster, because it would entirely tie our hands, make us prioritise exactly the issues prioritised by the Westminster Government and leave us no margin of appreciation in our own decision-making. Decisions on funding allocations are made by the Executive, and I gently remind the UUP and the DUP that they are both members of that Executive. The DUP, in particular, has considerable influence over decisions that are made in the Executive: use that influence where it matters.

While we are working closely with the Chief Constable to stabilise and grow officer numbers, I am acutely aware of the necessity of providing an appropriate pay settlement for serving police officers. I am actively considering the recommendations of the Police Remuneration Review Body (PRRB). I am on record as saying that it is my desire to

implement the recommendations in full, and we are focused on making that case as strongly as possible to the Department of Finance. However, I have recognised that the incremental pay award for police officers is contractual and therefore an inescapable pressure, and, on my return to office this year, I instructed officials to proceed on that basis rather than await the consolidated pay award decision. That means that officers will have that money in their pocket. There is ongoing collaborative work between DOJ officials and PSNI colleagues on the pay remit documentation to secure approval of the incremental element that was commissioned on 31 July. I am pleased to confirm to the House that that was approved on Friday. The PSNI was advised and, hopefully, can now get that money into people's pockets.

The accounting officer letter, of course, has drawn some attention. It is regrettable and disappointing that private correspondence continues to be sensationalised, distracting from the constructive working relationships. Interestingly, it had the same cc list as the Chief Constable's letter, but that did not trigger a round of debate and a media circus around how desperate the police were for numbers. It is only when there is criticism of the Department that anybody in the Chamber seems to wake up to the fact that there is a problem.

The permanent secretary in any Department is the principal accounting officer for that Department. The role carries with it responsibility for ensuring the regularity and propriety of departmental expenditure, for promoting value for money and for ensuring that there are robust systems of corporate governance and financial control in the Department, including living within budgetary controls set by the Assembly. Under devolution, it is for the Assembly and the Executive to make those decisions. Money from the block grant is unhypothecated, and we need to be aware of that. My Department's role in distributing its budget is to allocate the PSNI budget, having regard to its request for resources and the overall financial envelope allocated. Outside routine budget-setting, monitoring and allocation processes, we are commissioning and supporting the development of bids in response to opportunities for additional funding as and when they arise, including for the security element of funding.

As a locally elected representative, I am committed and determined to deliver better outcomes for the people whom I serve and the community in which we all live. As Justice Minister, I have ensured that the vital work of

policing and justice has been properly reflected in the Programme for Government, and I am making progress on the revised environmental allowance, police pay and police numbers by working closely with the Chief Constable, his staff and the board. However, I cannot deliver that in isolation. It is not about pitting the PSNI against the Department, the Department against the Executive or even the Executive against Westminster. It is in our collective interests that we have a stable, sustainable and effective Police Service. My focus, as Minister, is on ensuring that we all continue to work together effectively to deliver that for our community.

Policing in Northern Ireland has my full support. I will continue to work with the Chief Constable, the Policing Board and my Executive colleagues to ensure that the PSNI is adequately resourced for the challenges that it faces. I look forward to Members who have taken such an interest at this time continuing to support that work in future.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. I call Doug Beattie to make a winding-up speech on amendment No 2. You have five minutes.

Mr Beattie: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Policing is an increasingly complex issue, and we ask more and more of our police force every year with less and less resource. It has been a good and robust debate, and it is right that we have a robust debate. This has certainly not been theatre. I disagree with the Minister in that I do not think that anybody has been dragged through the mud, but I agree with her that this is a life-and-death issue. It is good to have these debates. I thank the Chief Constable for raising the issue, because that is what brought us here.

In winding up on our amendment, I will raise three issues. First, funding and resourcing of the police is not an operational matter but a strategic issue. That is an important point, because failure to understand the difference between strategic and operational matters is where we have a problem. Nobody is arguing that the Minister or other politicians should be involved in the day-to-day running of the police's tasking, routine, logistics or cooperation with other Departments' forces. That is the operational level at which the Policing Board should help the Chief Constable with an oversight and challenge function. However, ensuring that the police have enough funding to resource and plan for long-term outcomes and have the right workforce to achieve those high-level initiatives is the strategic level.

The Assembly is right to scrutinise the Minister. It is important that we scrutinise the Minister. I thank the Minister for coming to respond to the debate. It is right for the Minister to stand up in the Chamber to fight for her police force. I would like to see more of that, to be honest.

The second issue is this: is the Chief Constable right to reach out to the Prime Minister's office for further funding? Of course he is. If he can add value by reaching out to the Prime Minister's office, he should do that. Chief constables across the United Kingdom have the ability to reach into the Prime Minister's office and to inform policy through the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). Although the PSNI is not a full member of the National Police Chiefs' Council, it contributes to it, and the NPCC speaks to the Prime Minister's office all the time. Instead of castigating the Chief Constable over a letter that he sent to the Prime Minister to raise the profile of an agenda and try to secure funding, we should welcome his initiative in doing so. He is standing up for his force and his rank-and-file officers; I have not heard one voice today that has not done similar, so I think that he is right to do so.

The third issue is the question of where the extra cash will come from. That is an important and a fair question. We voted against the Budget because it is not workable. It is just unworkable: simple as that. I was staggered to find out that the Minister had not engaged with her Chief Constable to say, "This is the likely outcome of a Budget", before agreeing to it. That is the fundamental problem.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beattie: Of course.

Mrs Long: That is factually inaccurate. Before I signed off on the Budget, I engaged with all the arm's-length bodies of my Department and made it clear that they were likely to face significant pressures. Had I not signed off on the Budget or had we supported the only call that came from the Ulster Unionists, which was to strip funding from every Department and put it into the Department of Health, they would be in an even more parlous situation.

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

Mr Beattie: Well, that is on record: you said that you engaged with the Chief Constable. That is OK. I was told something different.

Mrs Long: By whom?

Mr Beattie: In saying that, our amendment lays out where that extra cash could come from.

Mrs Long: By whom?

Mr Beattie: Stop heckling.

There is a serious and credible national security threat in the United Kingdom. That is magnified in Northern Ireland, where there are republican terrorists, loyalist paramilitaries, organised crime gangs, the far right and the far left. We have the only open border with the EU, which means that we are at risk of wider, global terrorism.

Mr Carroll: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beattie: I am sorry; I have no time.

To that end, a case can be made directly to the Prime Minister's office and the Home Office for more funding to help with national security operations.

5.00 pm

We simply cannot allow our Police Service to dwindle any more than it has already. We have 4,500 operational officers who we can put on the streets. That is absolutely pitiful. There are 700 or 800, or maybe more, who are on short-term or long-term sick. Policing is a contact sport; that is the reality. They need resilience. Patten talked about 7,500 officers and 2,500 reserves. Technology means that we could reduce that number, but we are not anywhere close. This is a wake-up call for us to understand the nature of what is happening with our Police Service, and we should all, rightly, support it now.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Colin McGrath to wind up on amendment No 1. Colin, you have five minutes.

Mr McGrath: Thank you very much, Principal Deputy Speaker. It was the hope and intention of the SDLP that, in moving this amendment today, we would try to provide a bit of space for slightly cooler heads to prevail and demonstrate to the public at large, and particularly to the PSNI, that we collectively in here support the work that it does. It has to be a priority for us to have a Police Service that is fit for purpose and has our full support, given the many challenges that it has faced in recent times. Some of the comments that have been made in the debate today may be people's interpretations, rather than necessarily being fully fact-based. The

summer recess meant that we did not have the opportunity to address those matters a little bit more quickly, which might have taken some of the heat out of the issues.

I reiterate that we should take the opportunity in this debate to show our collective support for the police, and for those officers who work in some of the most difficult situations with resources that are stretched beyond imagination. Of course, I said that we had that opportunity today, but what we have — I will take this opportunity to have one quick Opposition dig — is a four-party Executive in which one party is criticising another one, another party is amending that criticism, one is not supporting any of the criticisms, and a fourth is having to defend itself to everybody. We are only a few hours after the presentation of the Programme for Government, when we were told that youse all work together greatly.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: I am delighted to.

Mrs Long: I thank the Opposition for, on this occasion, their constructive approach.

Mr McGrath: I am going to frame that. Thank you very much.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: OK. Colin, you have an extra minute.

Mr McGrath: As far back as —.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for giving way. Sometimes, there is a spat between the parties in the four-party Executive. This may be against protocol, and I would not want you to be rebuked for it, but maybe there is an opportunity for you, as the sister party of Labour, to raise the issue of finances separately.

Mr McGrath: We will regularly use any influence that we have to get additional funding here to support our public services. I do not think that we can take any more money off our public services. They are as strained as they can be. We have to do all that we can to try to support the public sector in the work that it does.

As I was saying, as far back as 1999, the Patten report told us that we needed a Police Service complement of 7,500. At the start of this month, there were only 6,298 officers, which is a reduction of 436. That cutback is most evident in community policing. It is difficult

to see that, because that is often the public face of policing. It is an opportunity for the public to engage with officers whom they see regularly. The officers build up a relationship with the community, and it is an opportunity to try to break down some of the barriers that there may have been in the past between policing and some communities. If we are left with just response officers, or, by and large, with response officers, we shift the focus from proactive community policing to reactive policing.

Like everyone else in this place, I watched the storm that brewed over the summer. In all honesty, I cannot fathom why the Chief Constable was not allowed to say and do what he did. Did he write an open letter to the newspapers? No. Did he go on to any of our media broadcasters to shine a spotlight on the problem? No. He wrote to the Prime Minister to see whether there was an opportunity for some additional funding for the work that he does. Think about some of the other public bodies that we have. As has been referenced, we have heard from the Housing Executive that there is not enough money for what it does. I think that just about every trust chief executive has been on the airwaves to say that they do not have the funding for the work that they do. I think that every head teacher has said publicly that they do not have the funding to do the work that they do. In this instance, another head of a public organisation was saying that they need to get more money to be able to do the work that they do.

Included somewhere in the debate was — when I reflect on all the contributions, I think that it was there — agreement that we all support policing, that we want to see adequate policing here and that what is important is that we should be supporting that today, collectively. I believe that the aim of our amendment was to cool things. I think that it was constructive opposition, and I hope that, on that basis, we might receive cross-party support for it.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Trevor Clarke to conclude and wind up the debate on the motion. Trevor, you have 10 minutes.

Mr Clarke: Thank you very much, Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank everyone who took part in the debate today. I think that everyone's contributions — almost everyone's — have been well mannered and reasonable. I will give a summary of what some Members said, and I think that there has been a general theme.

My party colleague from Mid Ulster kicked off the debate. He talked about the concerns in policing and the necessity for a fair and equitable budget. No one, including the Minister, will disagree with that, but the thrust of the motion is about how we got here. When Jon Boutcher wrote the said letter, he probably did not realise that it would get as much attention as this. Today's debate, however, has been useful in enabling us to thrash that out and keep in people's minds the importance and necessity of having a properly funded police service. I appreciate what the Minister said about having tried to do that and not always getting the support, but, for us, it is about how it looks for the Department of Justice to rebuke the Chief Constable for sending the letter.

Mr Buchanan was followed by the Member for Foyle, who also understood the need for a fairer and more balanced budget. Again, no one would disagree with that. The Member for North Down Mr Chambers reminded us about Patten and the numbers that were envisaged back then. Indeed, the conversation about numbers continued right up to New Decade, New Approach, but, of course, many people rushed back here without our being adequately funded directly after New Decade, New Approach. Whilst the two Governments of the time decided on the number of police that we should have, they, of course, did not adequately fund that. Many people were mad to get back here and saw ways of fixing that, but nothing has changed.

The Member for North Belfast followed, and he reminded us again of the numbers and the need to consider how we address that. He referred to how many of us saw the attempt from the Department to gag the Chief Constable. Referenced already today were the contacts that the Chief Constable has and how he will use them. I think that that is useful. I accept that the Minister has made her calls at the Executive. I take that at face value and respect it. However, there are occasions when people know other people, and we should never waste that opportunity in trying to bring these things to a conclusion.

The Member for East Antrim Mr Dickson was, dare I say, very defensive of the Minister, as usual, and I will park that one there. He was followed by my other colleague from East Antrim, and she was the first to mention the importance and significance of today for the emergency services. Indeed, the Minister acknowledged that in her contribution as well. Sometimes, we forget the role that all the emergency services play and what they do in serving our communities.

The Member for North Belfast and my colleague on the Policing Board was defensive of the Minister and reminded us of our obligations. Of course, the letter reminded Mr Boutcher of his obligations, and that is what got us here. Sometimes, we need to be careful about language, about how we rebuke people and about how we explain things. We all have an appreciation of the difficulties of policing, but, sometimes, the language that we choose to use can cause difficulties.

Joanne Bunting, my colleague from East Belfast, talked about unsustainable cuts. No one disagrees with that, bar one Member in the corner, although the less said about that, the better. The Chief Constable's approach has been different, but he has been in position for almost 12 months now. We have all been aware of these issues for 12 months, and it is interesting that it is only because it has got to this stage that we are now getting a plan together to try to address the funding issue. It is concerning that it has taken so long.

Miss McAllister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Clarke: I will, yes.

Miss McAllister: You sit on the resources committee, and there have been many times over the past 12 months when there has been recognition, on both my part and on your part, that more work was needed in the PSNI, do you take back your comments that recognised that there was still more work to be done regarding the PSNI's finances and any business case coming forward to the Department?

Mr Clarke: As you said earlier, those were private meetings, so I do not want to say too much. You are right about how the Policing Board has approached that, but maybe a letter about the business case would have been more prudent than rebuking the Chief Constable for his letter in which he took the opportunity to use his offices. Not only did he write to the Prime Minister, he publicly met the Prime Minister.

I commend my colleague from North Down for his maiden speech. I also thank his mother and father: I am very glad that they did not give him that other name as I could not pronounce it. *[Laughter.]* He referred to his children and told us all about their interests. Maybe some of them should consider being a toolmaker because it seems to be the matter of the day in the Labour Party, and the Prime Minister reminds us of that quite frequently.

I was very disappointed by the Member for Upper Bann. He was nearly giving us all a lecture on how public finances work. We are all very aware of the public finances, but dire circumstances do not require dire responses. No one underestimates what your Minister has done to try to address the underfunding in policing, but, clearly, within the constrained finances that the Executive have, it has not worked. I thank the current Chief Constable for making that call because it has brought the debate on the matter to the place where it is today. It has also concentrated minds on whether he or others have missed an opportunity in how they have approached the issue. Now, at least, they have taken the opportunity.

Mr Tennyson: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member is effectively saying that the saga has been a wake-up call, and it has, but it has only been a wake-up call for those of you who have been asleep at the wheel. I make no apologies for reminding you of that.

Mr Clarke: I make no apology for coming straight back at you. It was this party and this party alone that made the call to the British Government for additional funding. Many of you wanted to come back here much sooner with no additional resources. *[Interruption.]* I can see you shaking your heads, but ours was the only party that said that. We wanted more than we got, and many of you said, "No, let us get back in there. We can fight from the inside, and we will get sustainable government from there". Clearly, that did not work, and I make no apology for reminding the Member of that.

The debate has been good hearted. The crux of the matter, and I have heard this across the Chamber, is that we will support the calls for the Chief Constable to get the support that he requires. The Member for Upper Bann Mr Beattie referred to the number of active police officers being as low as 4,500. Many of them are working under real pressures, with so many colleagues off sick or sustaining injuries on duty. It is an awful situation when the Chief Constable has to call for mutual aid from Scotland to help, as he did a few weeks ago, to give officers some time to recharge their batteries and get back out there.

One thing that we always forget when we see police officers under so much pressure is that they all have families at home who are worried when they are doing a normal job. However, when those people are working round the clock on long shifts, day after day, we are burning them out. The only way to address that is to get adequate funding. For those reasons and those

reasons alone, I will never apologise for supporting the Chief Constable in his efforts to make sure that policing is adequately supported. I look forward to seeing who supports the motion today.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I remind Members that, if amendment No 1 is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports the Chief Constable in his campaign to secure additional resources for the PSNI; notes with growing concern the serious pressures facing local and neighbourhood policing, crime investigations and rank-and-file officers as a result of chronic underfunding; highlights that the Chief Constable and his officers have a statutory responsibility to protect life and property, preserve law and order and prevent the commission of offences; strongly disagrees with any rebuke about the approach of the Chief Constable to the Prime Minister; re-endorses the recommendation in the Patten report that the number of full-time police officers should be 7,500, with the ambition of increasing that number further; endorses the Chief Constable's assessment that, since 2010, the policing budget has experienced a fall in real terms of 29%; and calls on the Minister of Justice, the Executive and the British Government to work with the NI Policing Board and the PSNI to urgently provide the funding to comprehensively address these structural deficits in the 2024-25 financial year and the subsequent years of this Assembly mandate.

5.15 pm

Assembly Business

Standing Order 10(3A): Extension of Sitting

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Business Committee of a motion to extend the sitting past 7.00 pm under Standing Order 10(3A).

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 9 September 2024 be extended to no later than 8.00pm. — [Ms Ennis.]

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Members may take their ease.

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

Private Members' Business

EU Funding for the Community and Voluntary Sector

Mr Gildernew: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges the positive impact that the European regional development fund and the European social fund have had on our society; notes British Government failure to deliver on the commitment to fully replace EU funding after Brexit; further notes that the previous British Government's Shared Prosperity Fund does not constitute the full replacement of EU funding; recognises the uncertainty for community and voluntary sector organisations regarding the continuation of the Shared Prosperity Fund post 2025; and calls on the current British Government to fulfil their promise to replace EU funding in full and to provide certainty for community and voluntary sector organisations beyond March 2025.

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

Mr Gildernew: A chairde [*Translation: Friends*] the folly of Brexit is playing out across all our communities in the North. The loss of funding, such as the European social fund (ESF) and the European regional development fund (ERDF), is impacting vital services across the community and voluntary sector, causing uncertainty in services that are often most needed by the most vulnerable groups across society.

We in Sinn Féin opposed Brexit, as we understood the importance of continued European Union support for our community and voluntary sector, peacebuilding, our agriculture and our economic development. The British Government have to date failed to live up to their commitment to replace European funding in its entirety. That failure to replace funding has placed many groups in a precarious position and has caused uncertainty about their long-term sustainability and their ability to provide the services that are so badly needed. The Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) of £127 million over three years represents a shortfall of

approximately £23 million per year for programmes that work to combat poverty and increase social cohesion, reduce economic inactivity and increase the skills base that is so important to our economy.

Services provided by the voluntary and community sector are of particular importance to our rural communities. For example, community transport is a vital service that connects many isolated people to essential amenities. NICVA has reported that, of 216,000 journeys taken on community transport in 2016, 46% were for health-related matters and transporting patients to hospital appointments when other means of transport were simply not available.

I also cite the important work of groups in my constituency, such as First Steps Women's Centre in Dungannon, which provides much-needed support. I hosted the Committee for Communities there for it to see at first hand the support that the centre provides particularly to women in south Tyrone in education, skills, child support, language development and in so many other important ways. I flag to Members the fact that First Steps Women's Centre will present here in the form of a human library on 8 October. I encourage MLAs to take the opportunity to meet them.

Voluntary and community and social enterprise organisations employ approximately 53,600 people across the North in the provision of mental health, disability and autism services and on projects dedicated to alleviating poverty, helping the homeless and those who struggle with addiction, assisting with employment skills development and assisting women to enter the workforce. Between 2014 and 2020, the ESF programme supported over 77,000 people into employment. The impact of the loss of £23 million per year is being felt by groups such as the Training for Women Network in east Belfast, which has already had its funding cut from 8% to 3.7% and faces yet another cliff edge as March 2025 approaches.

The Shared Prosperity Fund, administered from the distance of Westminster, is problematic and should, rather, be delivered through our Executive and Departments, which have a much clearer understanding of where the money is best spent to deliver the best outcomes across our communities. Local projects that provide local services to vulnerable people, create jobs and provide opportunities for young people are far better understood by local representatives and organisations, who understand the specific needs of their clients and communities.

The Sinn Féin Minister of Finance, Caoimhe Archibald, continues to lobby the British Government on funding guarantees beyond March 2025. I am sure that Members will be keen to hear about progress on that. Sinn Féin MPs have supported NICVA's calls for assurance from the British Government on the continuation of vital funding for the community and voluntary sector through the Shared Prosperity Fund. Just last week, John Finucane and Paul Maskey were in Westminster, meeting Minister Alex Norris to urge him to provide clarity on funding for the community and voluntary organisations that, we all know, form the backbone of our communities, providing transformational services for young people, workers and families.

There is no guarantee that the Labour Government will continue the Shared Prosperity Fund in its current form. Regardless of that, we need community groups that rely on it to have clarity on funding as soon as possible and to be given a guarantee that the funding will continue beyond 2025. I ask Members to support the motion.

Ms Forsythe: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "post 2025;" and insert:

"calls on the current Government to fulfil the promise to replace EU funding in full and to provide certainty for community and voluntary sector organisations beyond March 2025; and further calls on the Minister of Finance to make it clear to the Government that future programmes must be developed with due regard to the Executive's agreed priorities, and with meaningful input from local Ministers, in order to maximise opportunities for communities and projects across Northern Ireland."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): You will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. Other Members who speak will have five minutes.

Ms Forsythe: I welcome the motion's bringing to the Floor the critical issue of the funding of the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland, and I thank the Members for the opportunity to speak to it. Importantly, as chair of the all-party group on the voluntary and community sector, I welcome the opportunity to formally recognise once again on the Floor the value of the sector. Its contribution to the delivery of positive outcomes across society in

Northern Ireland is critical to every Department in delivering public services at the heart of communities in every constituency, urban and, especially, rural, such as my constituency of South Down. They deserve clarity about the sustainability of their funding.

The DUP believes that the UK Government have a responsibility to provide clarity on the future of the funding without delay. It is appalling that community and voluntary organisations, which do essential work, have been left in such an uncertain position. The cliff edge of March 2025 must be removed. With organisations, sadly, preparing to put staff on three months' notice, the decision-making cliff edge is even closer. We need clarity before December of this year. It is urgent: staff in the sector are skilled and valued, and they deserve clarity. We, as a society, cannot afford our services to collapse as we get closer to the cliff edge.

We want to see the spending power that was provided under the EU structural funds replicated and enhanced. The UK always paid more into the EU than it received back under structural funding. There can be no excuse for any shortfall in the funding now. The DUP does not accept that the situation was in some way inevitable as a result of our exit from the EU. Ultimately, previous Governments made promises that they have not honoured. We are also of the view that long-term, multi-annual budgeting for replacement EU funds should be a priority in what comes next. When the DUP held the Department for the Economy, it secured funding to ensure that projects benefiting from the European social fund were extended to March 2023. However, we need the Government's support to go beyond the temporary fixes.

Sinn Féin's motion focuses primarily on the quantum of the funding provided under the Shared Prosperity Fund. The size of the pot is, of course, extremely important. However, it is also critical that the priorities of future programmes better reflect the needs and circumstances of communities in Northern Ireland. Local projects have been hit with a double whammy: not only are we receiving less than we ought to, but the reduced funding that is coming is not being directed in the right way to meet local needs. Over the past two years, we repeatedly sought clarity on when shared prosperity funding would be available, how it would be administered and the degree of input that would be afforded to local Ministers. It is clear that, on all those fronts, the engagement of the previous Government was severely lacking. We want to see that remedied in future

Northern Ireland investment plans. We have always been clear that the aims and funding objectives of the Shared Prosperity Fund must align with the Executive's agreed plans for economic growth and social inclusion. We cannot be in a situation again where funding coming from the UK Government duplicates aims already covered by an Executive programme or where Northern Ireland's unique circumstances are not reflected in the development or administration of the funding.

Equally, the DUP does not believe that providing a more meaningful role for the devolved Administrations in deciding how and where the funding is targeted needs to be at the expense of retaining a national approach to providing greater economic and social cohesion between different parts of the United Kingdom. Given the tough decisions that will need to be taken by Executive Ministers in the coming weeks and months, we, on balance, do not believe that adding to the challenges facing our Departments by devolving responsibility for the schemes solely to local Ministers would be prudent or conducive to providing greater certainty to the community and voluntary sector.

It should be noted that, even under the framework of the previous EU structural funds, there was a role for the UK Government, working in conjunction with the devolved Administrations. That should be the blueprint. Locally, there is a need to enhance work with local projects to ensure that they are able to compete for funding effectively. It is timely that the critical nature of funding for the voluntary and community sector has been raised on the same day that consultation on the draft Programme for Government was brought to the Chamber, as organisations in that sector play an incredibly valuable role in this.

We support the call for the UK Government to honour their funding promises and provide clarity on the future of the funding without delay. Our amendment adds the call on the UK Government, working in conjunction with the devolved Administrations, to deliver on meaningful local projects that add value in our communities. I commend the amendment to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you for proposing the amendment.

5.30 pm

Mr Tennyson: There is no doubt that our community and voluntary sector offers invaluable support to our society by helping to

tackle economic, social and environmental challenges and often plugging gaps where government provision has fallen short. Yet, be it through the cuts imposed through the Secretary of State's punishment Budget during the absence of this Assembly and Executive, or through their funding being cast aside as collateral in the reckless and ideological pursuit of Brexit, those organisations have been treated shamefully by politicians in recent years.

At the end of 2022, I was contacted by Appleby Trust, an organisation in my constituency that offers vital supported employment opportunities for people with disabilities and which had benefited from the European social fund. That work is not just a nice, added extra but is absolutely essential to promote equality and tackle economic inactivity. I felt, frankly, embarrassed that, as this incredible organisation went about its work whilst facing a Brexit-shaped hole in its finances, there was no Assembly and Executive for them to turn to and no clear direction from the UK Government on replacement funding. That was despite a manifesto commitment from the Conservative Government that they would replace EU funding in full — another in the litany of unkept promises left in their wake.

Eventually, at the last moment, clarity came in the shape of the Shared Prosperity Fund, and, instead of the like-for-like replacement for ESF and European regional development funding that was promised, the transition proved disastrous, with thousands losing out on vital support, the loss of up to £23 million per year and a power grab, removing the devolved nations' role in administering the funding. That change has arguably been felt most acutely in Northern Ireland, as it is no secret that we were a net beneficiary of EU structural funds. Those allocations were made on the basis of our need to tackle issues around regional imbalance, economic inactivity and underinvestment, and if the UK Government are serious about the so-called levelling up agenda, replacement funding ought to be allocated on the same basis.

We know that the UK Government's role in administering funding means that, in some respects, there are now two masters, with risk of duplication of the work between local Departments and those in Whitehall, a lack of understanding of the needs and circumstances of local communities here and a risk that the projects funded do not neatly align with the Executive's strategic priorities.

Despite all the barriers that were thrown up, the sector responded with agility, often with creative consortium bids, to preserve as many of the

services that they offered as possible. It is unforgivable, therefore, that after all the strain that those organisations have been placed under, they again peer over another cliff edge, with uncertainty on future funding beyond March 2025. Such uncertainty hits the community and voluntary sector harder than other parts of our economy. Staff have to be placed on protected notice and preparation commenced to deliver services differently or, worse, to cease delivering services altogether. Once services and expertise are lost, it is almost impossible to replace them. To lose them would be a false economy, heaping even further cost and pressure onto our public services. After all that they have been through, the least that we can do for those organisations and their service users is to deliver sustainable funding to support the positive change that they bring to our society.

It now falls to the UK Government to make good on the promises made by the previous Government, and it is vital that they move swiftly. We need clarity on the short-term future of SPF as a transitional measure to give organisations in receipt of that funding the certainty that they so desperately need. Beyond that, we have a real opportunity to get replacement EU funding right. Together, the Executive can work with the UK Government to co-design a sustainable replacement with the community and voluntary sector, and I hope that the Finance Minister will take those representations to the Treasury and the Department on the Executive's behalf.

Mr Butler: Once again, Northern Ireland finds itself teetering on a cliff edge. It is a term that we have become horribly used to. This time, it is due to the previous UK Government's failure to replace essential EU funding, which is picked out in the motion and the amendment. At other times, however, it has been due to having no Assembly and no accountability. How many times must we face uncertainty, whether from the removal of critical financial support or the refusal of politicians to take their seats? It is an all-too-familiar cycle, sadly, for the people of Northern Ireland, and the people of Northern Ireland are those who pay the price.

The European regional development fund and the European social fund were more than just bureaucratic lines in a budget. They were indeed lifelines for many people. They provided tangible life-changing benefits to some of our most vulnerable communities and, in particular, the community and voluntary sector — especially those in the area of disability and learning disability — which has empowered thousands of people to gain skills, employment

and volunteering opportunities that have transformed not only their lives but the lives of their families and the communities in which they live. Those organisations that rely on this funding are the unsung heroes of society. They help people with disabilities to break out of isolation and into meaningful roles that build self-esteem and enrich our collective future.

Despite that indispensable work, the voluntary sector is facing a funding cliff edge, with no guarantees beyond March 2025. Let us be clear: the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, introduced by the previous Government, is not a full replacement for the EU funding that Northern Ireland was promised post Brexit. Without real action and long-term solutions, we will lose skilled staff, vital services and, most importantly, the trust of those who rely on the supports. The human cost could be devastating, with more people becoming marginalised from the labour market and more vulnerable individuals pushed further into the fringes of society. The Assembly must — with one voice — call on the new Labour-controlled UK Government to fulfil the commitment of the previous Administration to replace EU funding in full. While we are at it, let us not forget that the new UK Government, under Labour, have an obligation to reverse the broken promises that were given pre Brexit and its so-called sunny uplands. Let us be honest: so far, Brexit has been a disaster for Northern Ireland. It has created not only an economic strain but an Irish Sea trade border and a democratic deficit that, at times, threatens the very fabric of our political society.

The upcoming comprehensive spending review is the ideal moment for the new Government to right those wrongs and deliver deliberate, targeted funding that will transform the lives of those who need and deserve it the most. We cannot come back and keep coming back to the same cliff edges, asking the same questions and begging for the same solutions. The time for excuses is over. Our communities and services, and the people who rely on them, deserve better. It is time for decisive action to be taken, before it is too late.

Ms McLaughlin: I welcome the motion on the future of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The delivery of that fund and the failure to replace the ESF was, and remains, a pressing challenge in all our communities across Northern Ireland. Other Members have outlined the failures of the delivery of the UK SPF here and how the moneys provided by it in the first place fell far, far short of those funds provided under the European Union. For many years, through our membership of the European

Union, the ESF was the lifeblood of our communities, sustaining projects and organisations that quickly became part of the core public service provision.

In Derry, we saw at first hand the damage caused by the removal of the European funding. It has ripped away from our city, and from such organisations as the Women's Centre Derry and the Derry Youth and Community Workshop, their people, their skills and the community service that goes with them. Those organisations, and many, many more across the North, were failed by the British Government as well as by the dysfunctional politics here in Stormont. Most of all, they were failed by the decision to leave the European Union. After that vote, the British Government had time to put in place a replacement scheme that was fit for purpose. I know that many of us in the Chamber lobbied hard for the SPF to be delivered in a way that would work for Northern Ireland, but we were unsuccessful.

The failure of the Government to align the fund with our priorities, and to deliver it over the heads of the people here, was inexcusable, and its centralised management by Whitehall was totally misguided. The levelling up White Paper states:

"Levelling Up will only be successful if local actors are empowered to develop solutions that work for their communities".

It is clear that, through the SPF, where the previous Government promised to level up, they actually levelled down, and communities paid the price. My community has paid that price. On that aspect, I therefore agree with the motion and with the call from the Member for South Down Diane Forsythe:

"future programmes must be developed with due regard to the Executive's agreed priorities, and with meaningful input from local Ministers".

I remind the Member that that would have been a lot easier if we had had an Executive in place. We cannot ignore that. Hearing from the parties that collapsed Stormont that we need proper input from Ministers into the scheme is simply a bit farcical, particularly when it comes to this issue, because they literally left the community organisations to fend for themselves for years, out in the cold, without a Government. Lessons must be learned, but one of the lessons should surely be that reform is needed to end the cycle of collapse and veto here.

Organisations now face yet another cliff edge, and, thanks to those various failures, they have lost faith in the ability of the British Government to protect them from falling off such a cliff. I hope that the Labour Government can prove them wrong. In a letter to me, the then shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Hilary Benn, said that he was:

"all too aware of the consequences of the loss of European funding, and of the promises that the Government made — broken so far — that areas would not lose out."

Now is the chance for his Government to recognise that challenge and put it right. Today is a chance for all of us to call on the Government to deliver clarity for those organisations.

Finally, it is important to state two facts about our responsibilities in this Building, regardless of any progress that is made in influencing the British Government. First, it was not only the British Government that defunded projects that previously operated under European funding. Departments provided match funding to those projects. Since 2016-17, the Executive paid statutory national match funding that amounted to tens of millions of pounds. When European funding disappeared, so did funding from our Departments. That cannot be forgotten. Secondly, although the implementation of the levelling-up agenda failed, the scheme's core principle — no one should be limited by geography — is right. We need our own levelling-up agenda in this Government. That is called regional balance. The Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 is one example —

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

Ms McLaughlin: — of legislation that we should look at when addressing regional imbalances in Northern Ireland.

Ms Ferguson: As mentioned by all contributors today, the British Government's replacement for EU funding, the Shared Prosperity Fund, fell well short of what was delivered under the European social fund and the European regional development fund. As we know, the totality of funding from the Shared Prosperity Fund was £127 million over three years, whilst it was £65 million every year from the European structural and investment funds.

That failure, as mentioned, put many groups that have worked tirelessly to support the most

vulnerable in all our neighbourhoods and communities at huge risk. It left many families and households at even greater risk, because people are employed by those projects, and they have families. They have skills, and they have worked tirelessly for years. It left them in jeopardy of becoming unemployed. Even more importantly, it left the people in the communities that are the furthest removed from the labour market without a safe space in their community to call into and seek help.

As someone who has worked under an ESF project for many years in the neighbourhoods and communities, I know that we have a wealth of talent. We have people who are so talented but who may, at the moment, have complex issues that have arisen throughout their lives, be it trauma, bereavement, mental health issues, childcare issues or caring issues. That group of people would die to get back to work to improve their income and make life better for their family. At the moment, however, they need support and assistance. I found that two of the biggest issues for women in particular were lack of confidence, where they just needed support and confidence to get back out into the workforce, and mental health, which was another huge issue. In any employment programme that I have run throughout the years with a range of organisations, 25% of the individuals who came through our doors had mental health issues. They needed that support.

By working in neighbourhoods and communities — that is where the local knowledge and expertise exist — you can connect those people to the range of services that is available. That is what is so important about the programmes.

5.45 pm

That is why I want to come to the Shared Prosperity Programme. We have a range of organisations, and I think that all of us have had the opportunity to visit them. In my constituency, those include 21 Training, Mencap, Action Mental Health, Disability Action, NIACRO, Enterprise North West, Include Youth and Triax. Those organisations have worked here for not just the past few years but the past 15 to 20 years. They have gathered the expertise and experience to support our communities, and they play such a vital role, not only in providing employment and skills but in promoting social inclusion and combating poverty.

I had the privilege to go back to a project that I used work with. That was called Skills North

West, but is it now called Success North West. In March, it did an interim evaluation of its current project, and it found that it is already exceeding its targets. More importantly, it spoke to the individuals who are currently benefiting from that and saw, in such a short time, the resilience of those individuals, who can only be admired for getting back out there, starting their training and education and starting to network. You can see their confidence and their ambition to get back into the workforce. You could not pay for that. If you could bottle the work that those organisations do on a daily basis for individuals who need support, it would be priceless.

I will also mention the employment and mentoring officers and staff in Success North West. The 18 staff who work there bring their skills, experience and drive to the table. However, those individuals are at a cliff edge. We need to commend their work and that of the organisations. We need to ensure that this crisis does not continue. Funding needs to be secured for those valuable services. The British Government must make clear their commitment to continue funding the Shared Prosperity Fund beyond March 2025 and to provide a full replacement for EU funding with local control over its use.

Mr Kingston: I welcome the motion. It rightly highlights that uncertainty over the continuation of funding for important services delivered through the voluntary and community sector, previously funded through the European regional development fund and the European social fund, is causing a crisis in respect of the continuation of those projects and the retention of staff as we approach the last six months of current replacement funding through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

My party has proposed an amendment that we hope will be supported. It takes nothing away from the Sinn Féin motion, but it highlights the need for a collaborative approach between central government at Westminster and the Northern Ireland Executive to maximise the impact of such future funding in Northern Ireland according to our collective, agreed priorities.

Three weeks ago, on 21 August, I attended a meeting with community and voluntary sector representatives, held at the premises of NICVA — the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action — to discuss the funding cliff edge that is fast approaching with the Shared Prosperity Fund, which is due to come to an end in March 2025. Also in attendance were MPs from all five main parties in Northern Ireland: the DUP, the

UUP, Sinn Féin, the SDLP and Alliance. The voluntary and community sector groups represented at the meeting are all delivering employability support services.

We were told that, to date, approximately £57 million has been committed to Northern Ireland via the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to address economic inactivity. Via the fund, over 680 staff across 59 voluntary and community sector organisations throughout Northern Ireland are delivering tailored support across the region to over 11,500 people — I will say that again: 11,500 people — who are considered furthest from the labour market for a range of personal circumstances, including long-term health issues or disabilities. Those people are clients who would otherwise struggle to access mainstream services and support. Through that community-level support, literally thousands of people have been helped into employment or training and education for future employment.

There was agreement among all who were in attendance at that meeting that they would lobby the new Labour Government at Westminster for an initial 12-month extension to the Shared Prosperity Fund ahead of any spending review and for long-term funding for this important work. There was debate and a range of views expressed about the need to ensure that such funding is ring-fenced, recognising that if it were just to become part of the block grant to Northern Ireland, it could be at risk of being allocated to other pressing needs.

Of course, the UK paid more into the EU than we received back, but, post-Brexit, it is essential that government funding for employability support services, which was previously delivered through those EU funding streams, is prioritised and ring-fenced. Furthermore, given the impact of Brexit on the free movement of labour into the country, it is vital for our economy that those of our citizens who need additional support to become economically active should receive that support and encouragement for their own benefit and for the benefit of the economy.

I hope that this is an issue and a cause that all parties in the Assembly will be able to unite behind as they did at the meeting that I attended at NICVA.

Ms Armstrong: I thank Colm Gildernew from Sinn Féin for proposing the motion and Diane Forsythe for tabling the amendment. To be honest, I support both, but I will support the amendment, because it names a Minister and asks for consortium working.

Newbies in the House may not know — others are bored of me saying this — that I worked in the community and voluntary sector for a very long time — it was in excess of 23 years — and in community transport for the 16 years before I came to the House. I will say honestly that European money is not the answer to everything, because, in the 16 years that I worked for community transport, I had one period where I had an employment contract that lasted for more than 12 months. Our Government do not fund the community and voluntary sector in a sustainable way.

I am not going to turn away money that is going to replace European funding. Of course we need that, but I sat with the permanent secretary in the Committee for Communities when he told us that he had asked the UK Government whether they could control and manage the payment of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund money out, because there was a fear that there would be duplication. That control and management were not allowed to happen, and there was duplication. There was duplication of work that was being done by our councils, other Departments and sections of Departments, and it did not make sense. If we are going to ask the British Government to replace the money, we should ask them to allow us to set the priorities.

Today, we had the draft Programme for Government, which has set out Northern Ireland's priorities. Those priorities are key. They have been put into the Programme for Government for a reason. They have been put there as reasons why we can make this place better, and that is what we should be doing. It is not a lot of use to us in Northern Ireland to take forward priorities that are more useful in England than they would be here. Let us take the rural development programme as an example. I come from a rural area, and I know how vital that programme was to our rural communities and our coastal communities, which I am also part of. Quite often in big programmes, those areas and communities are ignored.

When we are setting our priorities for Northern Ireland, I do not want to see the community and voluntary sectors tearing each other apart trying to apply competitively for grant funding that sees some of those organisations disappear. We almost had that with the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. There were supported employment programmes that saw one side compete against the other at a time when we had the worst figures for the number of people with disabilities in employment. We need all

those sectors to come together and deliver for Northern Ireland.

We also need to consider sustainability. Any of you who have worked in the community and voluntary sector will know exactly what I am talking about. When long-term funding is not available, all of a sudden, you have to invent programmes in order to apply for the money. There is short-termism there but not multiple savings. I could talk to you all day about how much I could have saved if I had been allowed funding over seven years instead of three years when I was buying minibuses. I could have had a longer repayment period instead of having to do it all in three years, costing me twice as much. We need to think about sustainability. European funding came in blocks of time, and we have people who are employed for blocks of time. We invest in the skills of those people for blocks of time, but we need to develop it across time so that the benefits of bringing people into employment — improving community and place, and improving peace-building — are stretched out over a longer period.

I heard Brian say that if we put it into the block grant, it would not be there specifically for those purposes, but it is up to us to make sure that money is set aside for our partners in the community and voluntary sector. After all, we have the concordat. What I would love to see from our Executive is a re-signing of the updated concordat — the partnership agreement between us and the community and voluntary sector — that at long last recognises how much we all need its work. Communities could not exist if our community and voluntary sector was to disappear. It needs sustainable funding; we need its sustainable programmes and intercessions to help our community.

I thank the Members for tabling the motion. There has to be consideration across all Departments. DAERA will be looking at rural and coastal communities and will want to have those included. The Department for Communities will be looking at people and place, and the Department for the Economy will be looking at employability. It is right that we drive that forward. We should take it forward and take it to the UK Government, hopefully with the lead of the Minister of Finance, to say, "Guys, we can do so much with this money. Let us use it in the way that would be best for Northern Ireland". Furthermore, the amount of money needs to be negotiated to make sure that we have an appropriate amount that can be spent sustainably in the way that we want.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): All Members who indicated that they wished to speak have

done so, so I call the Minister of Finance to respond. Minister, you have up to 15 minutes in which to speak.

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.]* I thank the Members who tabled the motion and the amendment.

The impact and benefit of the European social fund and the European regional development fund in the North was clear. The European social fund provided funding for vital services through the community and voluntary sector to support some of the most vulnerable people in society. It enabled people to develop new skills and to navigate the path to becoming economically active and promoted greater social inclusion. It was locally organised, place-based and person-focused. The European regional development fund provided funding that enhanced the competitiveness of small and medium-sized businesses. It also provided much-needed funding for research and development and for the move towards a low-carbon economy.

Over the seven-year period from 2014 to 2020, those two funds invested an average of around £65 million per year in the North. We had to adhere to some EU requirements on how the money was spent, but, ultimately, it was invested locally in harmony with other programmes. As such, it was aligned with our priorities and objectives. While there were criticisms of how those funds operated, particularly the bureaucracy attached to them, the investment was significant and the results clear.

I and my predecessor, Conor Murphy, have been engaged on this issue since 2020, while activity in my Department has been ongoing since the Brexit referendum. The previous Executive took the position in 2020 on the replacement of the ESF and ERDF programmes. That called for a full replacement of the funding that we derived from EU sources, local delivery of funding using existing structures and full compliance with our unique system of government, including section 75 considerations.

The British Government's long-promised and much-delayed replacement for those funds — the Shared Prosperity Fund — fell well short of that position. The delays in launching the fund resulted in the community and voluntary sector here dealing with annual funding cliff edges with a significant impact on the capacity and, at times, even the very viability of the sector. It

has delivered significantly less than the equivalent EU funds, with an average of just £35 million per annum across the three-year period in comparison with the £65 million from ESF and ERDF across seven years.

The Shared Prosperity Fund operates with a reduced scope, creating gaps in provision. It is operated directly from Whitehall according to priorities set by the British Government, with no decision-making role for our Executive, nor was it subjected to our section 75 equality scrutiny.

At times, its delivery here has lacked an understanding of the North, as it has sought to apply an English template to a place with a different structure of government and different needs. It was simply inadequate, unsuitable and late, and, frankly, it has scarred our community and voluntary sector.

6.00 pm

With the Shared Prosperity Fund due to close at the end of this financial year and a new Government in London, there is an opportunity to do something better. The new Government made a manifesto commitment to restore control over the funds to devolved Governments. That is a welcome position, and I look forward to working with the Labour Government, Executive colleagues, the Assembly and our wider community on how that will operate in practice. The position on the replacement adopted by the previous Executive remains valuable. However, my officials are working with all the other Executive Departments to draft a document outlining the North's requirements from future funds. That will be brought to the Executive for consideration in the near future.

I wrote to Angela Rayner, on her appointment as Secretary of State, about this matter. In particular, I pressed for urgent clarity and for her to make good on the manifesto commitment to greater devolved decision-making. I will also meet Minister Norris, who has responsibility for future funding in Angela Rayner's team, next week on 17 September. I intend to press the vital importance of sufficient funding being provided; that it is provided at the right time to prevent another funding cliff edge through appropriate simplified local structures; and that it is provided in a way that minimises bureaucracy, that is aligned to our Programme for Government, that allows a meaningful decision-making role for our Executive in line with the Labour manifesto commitment and that respects local needs and differences.

It is essential that any plans associated with the Shared Prosperity Fund are set out, at the latest, in the Chancellor's Budget at the end of October. To achieve that, I intend to raise concerns about successor funding directly with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, as well as with Minister Norris. Failure to provide that clarity would create yet another avoidable cliff edge for the sector. That would lead to protective notices being issued, result in a loss of capacity and impact the continuing viability of our vital community and voluntary sector.

As the motion rightly says, certainty is now required. I will continue to press for urgent clarity and a meaningful devolved role in decision-making and delivery. It will require significant work from us once we have an understanding of what the Chancellor will announce. I and my Department stand ready to lead on that work and to collaboratively design, develop and deliver a meaningful programme of funding. I hope that our community and voluntary sector will soon have the certainty that it so urgently needs and deserves. Therefore, I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Minister, thank you for that response. I call Paul Frew to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. Mr Frew, you have up to five minutes.

Mr Frew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

First, I commend everyone who has taken part in the debate for the sentiment that has been expressed and the demeanour of their contributions. That has happened because we all value the community and voluntary sector. Any MLA worth their salt will deal with those groups every week and will know the value that they contribute to our people in public health, mental health, transport, social inclusion, wealth, employment, regeneration and development. Every sphere of life and every sphere of governance is encapsulated in the community and voluntary sector. I want to see smaller government. That voluntary and community sector must have a pivotal role in delivering for our people — delivering better than government could ever do. That is why this is such an important matter and why we should discuss and debate it today in plenary on our first day back.

There were a lot of thoughtful and informative contributions. I do not wish to get into naming Members and picking out bits and pieces other than to say that I valued every contribution. Whilst I am a great champion of tranquillity and peaceful debate in the Chamber, this really has done my heart good because I can see the

worth. Every Member who spoke and all parties have a real opportunity to unite on this issue.

I will explain our amendment. We have not sought to amend the motion to apply pressure on the Minister or to target her. We realise that, in her position with regard to finance, she is best placed to be the tip of the spear in combating poor governance from Westminster. Let us call it what it is. We have replaced Brussels with Whitehall, and it has let us down just as badly.

We have had a missed opportunity. The British Government put more funding into the EU and got less money out, so why are we left in a position where the Government give Northern Ireland less funding than EU funding was delivering? It is absolutely appalling to be in this position, so it does my heart good to hear the united voice coming out of the Chamber. We have an opportunity, and we should remain hopeful because we have a new Government in Labour. We will hold their feet to the fire with regard to the broken promises that the previous Government made to this place and its people on EU funding.

It is vital that we stress how important the funding is and the impact that this issue and the failed opportunity has had on the people who work in the community and voluntary sector and on the people who are serviced by it. It is so painful to have to live through this. It was painful enough to live through the bureaucracy of having to apply endlessly for funding on a yearly or three-yearly basis, but how much tougher is it now, when there is not the same amount of money to fulfil the needs of our people, needs that our Government will not be able to fulfil? That is why the community sector is so important to our people.

I leave the Chamber with the hope that each party gets it and will do its best to deliver for our people and that the Minister of Finance will be the tip of the spear in the protest to get adequate funding for our people. It is vulnerable people, who need it the most, who usually end up getting supplied through and serviced by that funding, so it is critical that we sing with one voice, say to the British Government, "What you have done is not good enough. The failed promises of the past are not good enough", and call on the new Government to fulfil the promises and pledges of the previous Government.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call Áine Murphy to conclude and wind on the motion. You will have up to 10 minutes.

Ms Á Murphy: I thank all Members for their contributions. As Paul referenced, it is heartening to hear the Chamber speak with unity on such an important topic.

In my role as Sinn Féin spokesperson for rural affairs and as an MLA for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I take the opportunity to highlight how rural and border areas have greatly benefited from EU funding. For example, EU Pillar I and Pillar II programmes have provided financial support to farmers, businesses and communities.

The community and voluntary sector has played a pivotal role in providing services for our most vulnerable. One such recipient of European social funds in my constituency is Fermanagh New Horizons. I highlight the excellent work that it does, working to support the recovery of adults experiencing mental ill health who are interested in progressing towards training and employment.

Rural communities have benefited from a ring-fenced budget and multi-annual funding package and fully embrace the bottom-up approach to engage local people in the decision-making process. However, the Shared Prosperity Fund is neither rural-proofed nor equality-proofed but delivered directly by Whitehall.

It is also worth highlighting that, as with EU replacement funds for the community and voluntary sector, there is no clarity on the future of farm support. Farmers have no clarity or certainty on whether farm support worth approximately £300 million per year will continue beyond 2024. My constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone is the largest recipient of farm subsidy payments and, I would argue, the most rural constituency in the North. Farmers go to the very heart of our rural communities. Without farm subsidies, how can they be expected to compete with their counterparts in the South, who benefit from a full range of EU supports?

The rural sector has been pointed in saying that, while the PEACE PLUS programme is cited a lot and the rural dimensions of that are welcome, it is not a replacement for the development programme. EU funding has provided significant benefits across a range of section 75 equality groups, including young people, people with disabilities, women and minority ethnic groups. That work has provided significant social and economic benefits, and it is imperative that EU replacement funding continues. We are in times of reduced public expenditure, worsened by the lack of clarity and

certainty on EU replacement funds beyond 2025.

During the Brexit referendum campaign, the Tory Government said that the North of Ireland would not lose out — I think that the exact phrase was "pound-for-pound funding" — but, of course, Brexit has delivered a huge cut to funding. The British Government committed to replacing those funds with the Shared Prosperity Fund, but that falls far short of what was delivered through the European social fund and the European regional development fund. After 14 years of a Tory Government who created and delivered austerity and Brexit, there will be a huge consequence for the community and voluntary sector, rural development and rural communities if the British Government do not replace EU funding in full. The community and voluntary sector needs certainty, clarity and stability. The current British Government must fulfil their promise to replace all EU funding in full.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges the positive impact that the European regional development fund and the European social fund have had on our society; notes British Government failure to deliver on the commitment to fully replace EU funding after Brexit; further notes that the previous British Government's Shared Prosperity Fund does not constitute the full replacement of EU funding; recognises the uncertainty for community and voluntary sector organisations regarding the continuation of the Shared Prosperity Fund post 2025; calls on the current Government to fulfil the promise to replace EU funding in full and to provide certainty for community and voluntary sector organisations beyond March 2025; and further calls on the Minister of Finance to make it clear to the Government that future programmes must be developed with due regard to the Executive's agreed priorities, and with meaningful input from local Ministers, in order to maximise opportunities for communities and projects across Northern Ireland.

Adjourned at 6.12 pm.