



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 9 November 2021

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Ministerial Statements

### Environment Strategy

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in light of the social distancing being observed, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members who are participating remotely must make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members who are present in the Chamber must do this by rising in their place or by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly.

I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. This is not a debate, and long introductions should not be used. I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during a statement or the question period after it.

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. With your permission, I wish to make a statement to the Assembly regarding Northern Ireland's first overarching environment strategy.

It is no exaggeration to say that never before have we faced such environmental challenges as those that confront us today. On a global scale, our world is under unprecedented pressure from population growth, the impact of fossil fuels and unsustainable living. The impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels, droughts and wildfires, pose a real risk to our communities and livelihoods across the world. Locally, our environment is under threat from pollution in its many forms. Action is required if we are to realistically respond to the challenges of climate change, the destruction of habitats, the loss of biodiversity and the impacts

of pollution on land and at sea, including plastic pollution.

Meeting and dealing with those challenges can be achieved only through global cooperation in tandem with local grassroots initiatives. We all have a responsibility to meet the challenges, and it is incumbent on all of us to protect and preserve our local environment as we strive to protect and preserve our planet for future generations.

Against that background, I am delighted say that, following Executive endorsement, I will launch a formal public consultation on a draft environment strategy for Northern Ireland on Thursday 11 November. The strategy sets out a vision for the future of Northern Ireland's environment and the Executive's role in dealing with the challenges that we face. I intend to adopt the final version of the strategy as Northern Ireland's first environmental improvement plan (EIP) under the UK Environment Bill. As I will outline to Members shortly, DAERA, on behalf of the Executive, is leading on developing the overarching, multi-decade green growth strategy. The environment strategy is intended to be a key document setting out Northern Ireland's environmental priorities for the coming decades, and it will be a key pillar in the delivery of green growth.

I also plan to consult shortly on a future agriculture policy framework that will have environmental sustainability as one of its key outcomes. Furthermore, subject to Executive approval, the Minister for the Economy plans to launch a new energy strategy before the end of 2021 that will outline the path to achieving net zero carbon energy in a way that is clean, secure and affordable. Taken together, the key strategies show my and my Executive colleagues' commitment to a future that addresses our significant climate and nature challenges whilst facilitating sustainable economic progress.

The environment strategy includes a mix of existing and new environmental targets and

objectives for all Northern Ireland Departments that have a role in improving the environment. The strategy links into the longer-term strategic objectives in our developing Programme for Government and aims to build on work that has been done across a wide range of policy areas, taking as its starting point the commitment in the draft outcome:

*"We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment".*

Key aspects that we will want to include are clean air, clean water, healthy soil and beautiful places to visit and enjoy, which benefit our physical and mental health.

The strategy will provide a coherent response to the global challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss to be addressed by the COP15 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) meeting in 2022 and the COP26 climate change summit in Glasgow, which, as we are all aware, is bringing international parties together to accelerate action on climate change.

My time at COP26 confirmed to me that climate change and biodiversity loss are inextricably linked. The evidence is clear that the state of our natural environment and its capacity to sustain us have been compromised. We are part of the natural environment and have a significant vested interest in accelerating policy and action to safeguard and restore our nature and biodiversity for the health and prosperity of current and future generations. As shown at COP26, our reliance on Northern Ireland's natural capital and ecosystems to provide nature-based solutions cannot be overstated. We need to protect and invest in nature now to start reaping the benefits and avoid the much higher costs of habitat loss and restoration if we leave it until later to act. We need to act now.

I am committed to delivering for nature and climate, and I recognise the importance of meeting COP26 commitments and those emerging from next year's COP15 on biodiversity. Northern Ireland faces a range of local environmental challenges, including habitat and species loss, agricultural greenhouse gas emissions, climate change, waste management, the development of a circular economy, soil quality, air quality and waste crime. In addition, the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union has provided new environmental opportunities. As environmental degradation poses an increasing challenge to all parts of the globe, there is a clear impetus for the first long-term, overarching environment strategy for Northern Ireland.

In the past decade we have made some notable advances in tackling local environmental issues. Perhaps foremost in the public's mind are the successful introduction of the carrier bag levy and the remarkable rise in our household recycling rates to 50% in 2019-2020. However, it is clear to everyone, not least to me, that more needs to be done — and with urgency. Northern Ireland's first environment strategy will form the basis of a coherent and effective set of interventions that can deliver real improvements to the quality of our environment and thereby improve the health and well-being of all who live and work here, create opportunities to develop our economy, elevate Northern Ireland to be an environmental leader and enable us to play our part in protecting the global environment for many decades to come.

The strategy sets out six strategic environmental outcomes that encompass all the main environmental challenges that we will face in the coming decades. The six outcomes are: excellent air, water, land and neighbourhood quality; a healthy and accessible environment and landscapes that everyone can connect with and enjoy; thriving, resilient and connected nature and wildlife; sustainable production and consumption on land and at sea; zero waste and a highly developed circular economy; and a fair contribution to UK net zero greenhouse gas emissions and improved climate resilience and adaptability

Those outcomes will form the basis of how Northern Ireland faces up to the challenges of improving our environment and our ability to connect with, understand and enjoy that environment in a responsible way. They provide us with a framework to foster environmental awareness and engagement through education and to live in harmony with our environment, which provides us with a home, a livelihood and somewhere to relax. In short, the strategy is a guide to how we can preserve, protect and improve our environment for our children and our grandchildren.

The framework of the six key outcomes of the strategy includes many concrete actions. The following examples give just a flavour of those actions: protecting 30% of our land and water for nature by 2030; conserving or restoring all of our semi-natural peatlands to healthy, functioning ecosystems by 2040; publishing the final river basin management plans next year; increasing the highly successful carrier bag levy to 25p; increasing the maximum fine for littering to £200; and applying for DAERA to become the world's first eco-Department.

The strategy will be an open-ended, living document that will be supported by a series of action plans. There will, of course, be costs associated with many of the proposed actions to achieve the critical outcomes, which will require adequate funding through a variety of mechanisms. My Executive colleagues and I will work to ensure that Northern Ireland has the necessary resources to tackle the significant environmental challenges that we face.

It is a truism that we cannot make the necessary urgent progress on the environment alone. My officials have been working with key stakeholders, including other Departments and external bodies, to develop the premise that a better environment can provide great economic, social and health benefits for individuals and society and to outline a pathway to realising those benefits. I look forward to that engagement continuing during the course of the consultation and beyond as we move to implement the final strategy.

The launch of the draft strategy will not be the first public engagement in relation to an environment strategy. My Department previously launched a call for evidence in September 2019 by way of a public discussion document. The level of public interest in the environment was evidenced by the fact that, at the end of the extended discussion period, in February 2020, no fewer than 2,500 stakeholder responses had been received.

As I mentioned at the start of my statement, my Executive colleagues have approved my intention to designate the final version of the strategy as Northern Ireland's first environmental improvement plan under the UK's Environment Bill. The Bill defines an EIP as:

*"a plan for significantly improving the natural environment",*

and, subject to Assembly approval, it will require DAERA and other NI Departments to set out the steps that they intend to take to improve the natural environment. Adopting the strategy as Northern Ireland's first EIP will give it legal underpinning, meaning that there will be a statutory requirement for ongoing reporting and monitoring against the targets and objectives on an annual basis.

As we emerge into the post-COVID-19 world, outside the European Union, we need, more than ever, to be prepared to face the environmental challenges of tomorrow. Every one of us, collectively and individually, has an important role in how we manage, preserve and

protect our local environment. If we all play our part and are ambitious with our plans, we can make a thriving and sustainable environment a reality and demonstrate leadership on this crucial issue.

The environment strategy aims to focus on ambitious outcomes for the big environmental issues that face us, which will make a difference to the lives and well-being of current and future generations.

The strategy that I am consulting on is ambitious in its breadth and depth. It contains about 50 key actions and targets, with timescales between 2022 and 2050.

#### **10.45 am**

Our environment affects every aspect of our existence. It is central to all life: what we do, what we eat, how we work, and where we live and play. It is, unquestionably, our most precious asset. The strategy sets out plans for protecting our local environment by making sustainable living central to every aspect of our lives in the coming decades. As I said at the outset, the environment strategy will be a key pillar of green growth. I commend it to you.

**Mr McAleer:** I thank the Minister for his statement this morning. Minister, you made reference to waste crime and waste management. Regardless of the fact that we have two jurisdictions on this island, we live on one single epidemiological island. We know that other elements of our environment, such as water and air, know no boundaries. Will the Minister outline to us what all-island aspects have been incorporated in the strategy?

**Mr Poots:** It is incredibly important that people work together in how they manage things and to ensure that they crack down on people who engage in criminality. During my period as Environment Minister from 2009 to 2011, I worked with ministerial colleagues in the Irish Republic to, for example, ensure that the waste that came to Northern Ireland via criminals was repatriated. It was something of a shock when I came back to the Department and found that that had not been progressed; a number of the illegal landfill sites had been cleared, but a lot of the waste had not been repatriated. I have raised that issue on quite a number of occasions with my colleagues in the Republic of Ireland, but it still has not been resolved. The Member is absolutely right: we need to see a better spirit of cooperation on these issues. I encourage colleagues across the border to engage in that spirit of cooperation.

**Mrs Erskine:** I thank the Minister for his statement. An issue that is prevalent in my constituency is ensuring that the waterways are clean and clear. I am sure that the Minister agrees that it is important that we protect the ecosystems that exist in the likes of Lough Erne. Minister, given that water quality is one of the six strategic outcomes in the document, do you agree that more needs to be done to stop untreated sewage entering our waterways and causing pollution?

**Mr Poots:** The Member is right. Of course, she represents a particularly beautiful part of Northern Ireland. The two loughs — Upper Lough Erne and Lower Lough Erne — are very precious assets to not just County Fermanagh but all of us. The protection of facilities such as, although not exclusively, the water bodies in Fermanagh is critical.

Our sewerage infrastructure has been challenged because, in many areas, much of the waste infrastructure is linked to storm infrastructure. The consequence is that, when we get heavy rain, storm water goes into the sewage, and that ends up, untreated, in a water body somewhere. It is incumbent on Northern Ireland Water to continue with a programme that will deal with those areas. Of course, the sensitive areas should be dealt with first. It is a critical issue that requires investment. We will require significant capital investment for our environment over the next number of years. The Member identified something that will not be led by my Department, but it will certainly be monitored by it. We, as a Department, will seek to ensure that Northern Ireland Water takes the actions that are necessary to avoid the circumstances described by the Member.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Paragraph 17 states that within:

*"the six key outcomes the Strategy includes many concrete actions."*

The bullet points that follow are not specifically actions but more suggested directions. I ask the Minister for an example of what is meant by:

*"Protecting 30% of our land and water for nature by 2030".*

What does that mean specifically and how is it likely to be done?

**Mr Poots:** We have a very long series of actions. For example, to connect to the environment, landscapes, seascapes and natural beauty by 2025, we will want 110

internationally awarded green and blue sites. We want to develop, by 2027, long-term strategic ways for the management, planning, enhancement and protection of our landscapes and seascapes. On water, marine and coastal water resources, we want to publish, by 2022, the final river basin management plans. The Member will know how important that is because of all the rivers that feed into Lough Neagh in his constituency. By 2027, we want 70% of water bodies to have "good" status, and, by 2031, we aim to reduce the nutrient surplus in soils and to achieve sustainable management of water and soils. I could go on, as there is a very long list of areas that we want to tackle that flow from this strategy. This is not something to gather dust; there is a whole series of action plans flowing from it.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you, Minister, for your statement. In paragraph 13, you refer to the:

*"remarkable rise in our household recycling rates to over 50% in 2019/20."*

In paragraph 15, under the six strategic environmental outcomes, you speak of:

*"Zero waste and a highly developed circular economy".*

What communication have you had with our councils to try to get their recycling rates above 50% and nearer to 100%?

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for the question. The councils have played a key role in getting our waste recycling rates up there, and their cooperation is essential. We set a target of 50% by 2020 and achieved it ahead of time. I set the target when I was Environment Minister, and, at the time, people said that we would not meet it, but we did. There is a new target of 65%, which is a UK-wide target. I would prefer the target to be 70% recycling and for the rest of the waste to be dealt with as energy from waste. Decisions have to be taken on energy from waste. For example, we have a gasification facility in Belfast in the Harbour estate, but we will need an expansion of that or the creation of further facilities to ensure that we continue to tackle the waste that is not recyclable.

The most important element with waste is not producing it in the first instance. A lot of the work that we are doing is on producer-packaging responsibility. People must take responsibility for the packaging that they produce and know that there will be a cost associated to them for producing the waste in the first instance. Regarding all the waste that is

coming from virgin goods, recycling is a good thing, but it would be better if we had less packaging and waste to recycle. Every company and business needs to take that on board and to recognise that they have to do what they can to reduce waste. Jeff Bezos from Amazon was at COP26, and perhaps he can take actions, other than flying into space, to really help the environment. As one of the biggest suppliers of virgin packaging in the world, he could massively reduce such packaging.

**Mr Blair:** I thank the Minister for his statement. With all the mentions of a circular economy and pledges for zero waste, is it not a fact that, without a green new deal, the UK Government and the Departments represented in the Assembly will seriously struggle to meet their carbon emission target reductions under the Paris agreement? Therefore, how can the pledge in the statement be taken seriously and credibly if there are no specific targets and action plans associated with that?

**Mr Poots:** I agree with the Member that they are struggling and will struggle. We need to look at how we set things that are achievable and deliver on them. Therefore, I am opposed to making aspirational commitments without having any scientific backing.

I am also very clear that, right across the UK and in Northern Ireland, if we are to deliver on the environment, as opposed to just saying nice things about the environment and how committed we are to having a better environment, that will involve real and significant investment. That real and significant investment will also involve decisions that displace investment from other places in which we currently invest. That is the challenge that faces the Executive and that will face a new Executive in 2022. If they are genuinely and truly committed to doing that, they will have to make tough decisions to bring it forward.

There is a cost to the public, so we need to be honest with them. If we are going to live in this consumptive society, we need to reduce our consumption of things that we do not need, and the things that we do need must be produced in an environmentally sustainable way.

**Mr McGuigan:** I was intrigued to read the line in paragraph 12 of the Minister's statement:

*"withdrawal from the European Union has provided new environmental opportunities".*

Most people would argue, in fact, that, in Britain, for example, there has been an immediate rollback on environmental practices. Just a couple of weeks ago, we all witnessed the disgusting and shocking sight of English water companies dumping raw sewage into their rivers and seas. Will the Minister give a commitment today that, in his strategy, there will be no regression from environmental standards and practices that we are used to in the EU?

**Mr Poots:** Nobody has ever proposed regression, so I am not sure from where the Member is introducing regression. We have the opportunity to apply environmental practices that are bespoke to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We are not in Finland, almost on the Arctic Circle, and nor are we in the southern Mediterranean in Greece or Sicily. We are Northern Ireland, and we have our own peculiar environmental aspects that they do not have, and they have their own peculiar environmental aspects that we do not have. Therefore, EU-wide policy is not the best fit to manage things at a local level.

We have the opportunity to develop bespoke arrangements to protect our environment, to support our agriculture community and for a range of other things. We now have the freedom. We are the lawmakers. We are responsible to the people who elect us here, for which I am very grateful. We can be much more responsive to the needs of the community in Northern Ireland than an unelected European Commission and a Parliament of around 800 people — I may be wrong about that number — in which we have only three elected members. We can directly respond to the needs of Northern Ireland in a much better way, and I am pleased to have that democratic deficit restored to Northern Ireland.

**Mr Frew:** Given the need to protect and enhance our peatlands for carbon storage, improved water quality, flood mitigation and biodiversity, what steps could Departments take to ensure that those outcomes are achieved?

**Mr Poots:** As with all these things, it will not always be the responsibility of one Department. DAERA's peatland strategy is well developed, and it will be published soon.

We are looking at the Scottish experience. Uplands play a key role. Spending money to deliver those better natural defences will be beneficial to the likes of DFI. If we manage peatlands better, DFI will spend less money on

cleaning water because less peaty soil will get into it as a consequence.

**11.00 am**

Therefore, peatlands require better management. The first element of that is the wetting of the peatlands. That is responsible for over 50% of the degradation that takes place. In Northern Ireland, we have not seen the significant harvesting of peatland that we have seen in the Republic of Ireland. The Republic of Ireland talks about 100% net zero, and I am interested to see what it will do about peatlands, because it has devastated its peatlands, and a huge amount of carbon will have been released from that. It will be interesting to watch how it undoes the damage there.

In other parts of the UK and Great Britain, there will be higher levels of peatland erosion, which is a bigger challenge. Raised bogs here certainly need to be rewetted. We need to ensure that they become, basically, big basins of water that will support the peatland activity. We also need to continue to reduce ammonia. Therefore, I have taken steps, for example, that will take 25% of the ammonia out of the system, such as low-emission spreading equipment etc. We need to take further steps to reduce ammonia. We have been talking to other people about appropriate tree planting close to farms and so forth, which can absorb huge amounts of that material. We need to take those steps to restore peatlands. They are a particularly important part of our landscape. We need to ensure that there is appropriate strip burning in peatland areas, so that we do not lose hundreds of hectares at one time. Appropriate strip burning will help to ensure that, in drier periods, we do not have accidental fires. Peatlands are a particularly important element, and there is much to do on them; not so much on the sequestration of carbon but in reducing the carbon that they emit currently because they store a lot of it.

**Ms Á Murphy:** I thank the Minister for his statement. One of the key areas in the battle against climate change will be to address the subject of ammonia. The Minister just touched on that in his answer to Mr Frew. When will we finally see the long-awaited ammonia strategy from the Department?

**Mr Poots:** I hope that it will be very soon. I have said that before, mind you, but I genuinely hope that it will be very soon. It is a difficult and tricky one to finalise. However, we are getting there. The vast majority of ammonia emissions

come from agricultural sources. I think that around 15% is from the pig and poultry sector. I am hugely interested in the capacity to capture that ammonia. Pig houses have air conditioning and fan systems. If we can filtrate that ammonia into one source and capture it, could it then be put into a cracker that produces hydrogen? It is believed that farm ammonia would be a particularly heavy form of ammonia and would therefore be useful for the shipping sector.

It is about how we look at things differently. Ammonia should be looked at as a potential opportunity. Where we can capture it, we should capture it. Where we cannot, we should look to nature-based solutions, like appropriate tree planting adjacent to dairy farms, where a lot of the ammonia would be absorbed into the local environment. There are ways to tackle these things, and we need to adapt those ways to our particular circumstances in Northern Ireland. We produce a lot of food and want to continue to do so.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for his statement, in which he referred to the plastic bag levy being increased and to the maximum fine for littering. This is also an urban issue, but when you go around the rural roads, you see a shocking amount of litter. The situation was particularly poor during COVID. What more can the Minister do to put pressure on councils to emphasise and deal with the issue? Some councils are good at it, while some are very poor. To be honest, my council does not issue enough fines, but it is not about issuing fines to everyone. Rather, it is about getting out the message and getting people to improve their habits.

**Mr Poots:** It is a difficult one. When I am out walking on my road, which is a rural road, I come across chip papers, paper from fast-food outlets, Red Bull cans and all those things deposited at the side of the road. I literally do not understand it. We have an education process, and young people are taught from their schooldays, as they have been since my schooldays, about the importance of not throwing litter, yet people still engage in the practice as if it means nothing. They leave the responsibility to some other person, who goes out with a bag and a litter picker to collect it. It is entirely wrong that people do that.

We cannot have council officers driving around in vans, pursuing every car to see whether litter will be thrown out. Therein lies the difficulty, and a lot of it comes back to producer responsibility and ensuring that a lot of the stuff that they produce is biodegradable. We need to reduce massively the amount of plastic that is involved

in production processes. We need our councils to continue to be strong on litter waste, because it is an unacceptable trait of our society. Most of all, we all need to engage with people. We need to support those who collect waste and ensure that the message continues to be hammered out.

A hard core of people just do not seem to care about our environment, and they will deposit litter willy-nilly rather than leave it in their car until they get back home, where they can put it into the appropriate bin.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the Minister for his statement. The North has the lowest density of woodland in Europe, with just 8% of our land being forest. You have committed to the Forests for Our Future initiative. Will you give an update on it?

At my recent visit to COP26, I noted the importance of planting seagrass to help reduce carbon. Are the Minister and his Department exploring its use?

**Mr Poots:** In the first year of Forests for Our Future, in aiming for 1.8 million trees every year on average over 10 years, we planted 1.2 million or 1.3 million trees, so we did not hit the 1.8 million target, but, from a standing start, that is still very good. For some reason, up until around 2007, we were planting considerably more trees, and the number then dropped off fairly significantly for a period. We have put a lot of resource, support and additional money into the Forest Service, which grant-aids landowners to plant trees. Ultimately, I believe that it will be a successful project. I commend the Forest Service, which is working extremely hard to ensure its success.

The issue that the Member raises about seagrass is important. Identifying suitable sites will be hugely beneficial, because seagrass needs to be planted in fairly shallow water, and how it impacts on those who are out on our water needs to be considered. It has been suggested that, for the equivalent space covered, seagrass can be 35 times better than forest at capturing carbon, so we certainly need to look at it. We will never be able to stop all carbon production, and its sequestration is therefore critical in the battle to get to net zero.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Minister for his statement, and, on behalf of my party, I welcome the environment strategy.

Minister, I noted that you talked about the move towards waste management and the proof of

recycling and getting towards the 100% mark. When I was at COP26 last week, I had the opportunity to talk to some of the many councils that are having significant problems with waste management, particularly the long-term incineration contracts that they are tied into. They are trying to get out of those contracts. When the Minister has talked to his Executive colleagues, has he had a chance to ask the Infrastructure Minister to make a decision about the Hightown incinerator and get that moving now? That has a detrimental effect on our push to improve recycling across Northern Ireland.

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for the question. There will not always be easy decisions to make in managing our environment. Sometimes there will be more difficult decisions. I have corresponded with the Infrastructure Minister and have clearly identified to her that we need additional capacity to deal with waste that is not recyclable. Therefore, a decision needs to be made on energy from waste. It is for the Infrastructure Minister to make those decisions, because they are planning decisions. I will not interfere in her decision-making process and her responsibility, but I will seek to facilitate her in every way to identify the need that exists — we have done that — and demonstrate to her the importance of an infrastructure that will remove waste from landfill.

Going forward, the longer those decisions do not happen, the more waste goes to landfill and the more methane is produced from landfill. As those sites already exist, it is not difficult because you do not have to make that decision. There are already landfill sites capable of taking that waste, and the easiest thing is to put the decision off. We need to stop putting off decisions and make decisions, face the public on them, face the scrutiny of courts on them — all of the decisions are likely to be judicially reviewed — and move the country forward on that basis. We cannot move forward on the basis of paralysis. That just leads to nothing.

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Minister for his statement. To be honest, I am rather underwhelmed by its contents. Stuff like renaming the Department as an eco-Department does not really inspire me, but there is a consultation ahead. One of the key things that are meant to relate to this is the commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach' to establish an independent environmental protection agency. Why has that not been established yet?

**Mr Poots:** We are not renaming the Department an "eco-Department"; we are applying to be an eco-Department and to be the

first Department in the world to achieve that. We should not denigrate the hard work that people put into developing such things to ensure that Northern Ireland can be at the forefront and at the cutting edge.

The independent environmental agency is something that we could not move forward in the period from January 2020 to now, particularly given the background of the COVID crisis, to make the changes that would be required. That will be for a new Assembly and a new Executive to take forward on the basis of all the information that is available to them. It will be a choice for the new Assembly and Executive to make.

**Mr O'Toole:** Minister, I welcome the fact that the statement is happening, but part of the problem in Northern Ireland is that we have had many positive strategies on climate mitigation and the environment over the years but, frankly, abysmal delivery. We have a terrible record. We are a laggard not just on these islands but globally. As I said yesterday, 83% of the targets in our previous biodiversity strategy were missed. Of course, we still do not have binding climate change legislation or, as has been mentioned, an environmental protection agency. In the spirit of getting our actual intentions on the record, do you accept the recommendation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to limit temperature rises to 1.5°C? Do you personally agree with that target and with Northern Ireland having binding targets to deliver on that?

**Mr Poots:** The Member said nine words before his "but", and then he made a series of criticisms of Northern Ireland that run his country down, but that is up to the Member.

Not only am I saying that I want to see the 1.5°C limit but I have committed to the Under2 Coalition, which was established in 2016 and is now going to rename itself, as the target, which was under 2°C at that time, will now be less than that. It represents 57% of regional governments from across Europe, North America, Asia — all parts of the world, basically. They are committed to reducing our carbon and greenhouse gases and to making the environment a better place.

**11.15 am**

**Mr McNulty:** Thank you, Minister, for the statement and for the impetus for the statement. We all need to play our part in creating a new green society.

The statement lacks vision, big-ticket items and blue-sky thinking. I will make a suggestion: how about opening the canal between Newry and Lough Neagh? How about reopening, reconstructing, refurbishing, revitalising, rewinding and restocking the Newry canal, involving Infrastructure, Economy, Education and Health? Let us do something brilliant and imaginative and rewild that artery through our land. How about that for an idea?

**Mr Poots:** I would be entirely supportive of reopening the Newry canal, the Ulster canal and Lagan navigation. They would be good investments for the future of our country, tourism and North/South linkages. They would all be hugely beneficial. Unfortunately, it is not my Department that drives that, so the question is to the wrong Minister. If the Minister who has responsibility brings that forward, I would certainly support it.

The Member also mentioned rewilding. I have already recommended and encouraged Members to do this, but, if they want to see good practice, they should go to Glenwherry, where they have engaged in qualitative management. Work is being done on re-wetting the peatlands, and the number of ground-nesting birds has been raised and the biodiversity improved. That has not been done by allowing things to grow wild, because, when you let things grow wild, the like of briars, thistles, dockens, fern and so forth take over. Good management will ensure that you have a higher level of biodiversity. That is where we need to aim. You cannot have rewilding and biodiversity together because you will end up losing loads of species if you just abandon things.

**Ms Kimmins:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I also welcome his comments on reopening Newry canal, as, last night, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council agreed to open up conversations with Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council (ABC) on the matter, as it has responsibility for the canal. I look forward to that conversation.

Only six concrete actions are mentioned in the statement. Will you outline when we will see the rest of the actions?

**Mr Poots:** It is deliberate that there are six. When we looked at it initially, there were potentially 20, but we decided to become much more focused. That is why we have the six, which are key areas that we need to tackle. Air quality, water quality, carbon emissions and waste are all key actions that will come from the

environment strategy. Other strategies will pick up other issues. The environment strategy should not be looked at on its own; it should be looked at in the context of green growth, which we will speak about shortly. It needs to be looked at in the context of a biodiversity strategy, a peatland strategy and an ammonia strategy. All those strategies, which we are pulling together, will give us an overarching set of strategies that will encompass all the issues relating to the environment.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. The statement rightly recognises the good work that has been done in increasing recycling rates, yet it acknowledges that much more must be done on the road to zero waste. Will the strategy consider the merits of creating a single waste authority for Northern Ireland?

**Mr Poots:** This strategy does not. I am not opposed to that. However, we established three waste organisations. Two of those have pretty much fallen by the wayside, and one still exists. When I reflect on that, I do not think that it was the greatest success story ever. In going forward, we need to set clear targets for councils and fully assist them to meet those. We now have 11 councils. They are larger councils, they are more capable of entering into contracts and they can collaborate with one another. Perhaps it is something that we do not need to force and the organisations themselves will recognise that they can move forward with through good collaboration.

I know that, at this time, as Dr Aiken pointed out, some councils are in Arc21, for example, and feel tied to Arc21 in relation to what it does and, therefore, have been held back by a lack of decisions on what Arc21 wants to do. Others may prefer to move on to do something else but feel that they cannot. It is for councils, which have the responsibility for that side of waste, to do what is right for their ratepayers and the wider community at the same time.

**Ms Armstrong:** I thank the Minister for that welcome statement this morning. Minister, you said:

*"Action is required if we are to realistically respond to the challenges of climate change".*

Where are you with the Bill sponsor of the other Climate Change Bill, and how far forward can we get with the Bills?

**Mr Poots:** We have engaged with the Bill sponsor. My officials have engaged extensively,

but we are not finding common ground. That is unfortunate, because it is critical that we find a way through this and move forward together as an Assembly.

I do not think that there is a huge disparity across the House in what people want to achieve. People want to see a huge reduction in our greenhouse gases and carbon emissions. They want to see us developing means of sequestering carbon. Some people want to do it very quickly, and others say, "If we do it that quickly, there will be a huge cost associated with it, and we need to absorb that a little more slowly". Those are all challenges for the House to decide on. I trust that it will be a rounded decision that is based on qualitative science and will deliver on what people promise. As a politician, I have never been the type to overpromise. I prefer to under promise and over deliver than to overpromise and under deliver. I have been around since 1998, and, over the years, the politicians who have come in here and overpromised seem to have had a shorter shelf life than those who tended to be more measured.

**Ms Bailey:** I expect that many Members saw the recent BBC 'Spotlight' programme on the ongoing devastation caused by gold-mining in the Sperrin mountains. I think that I quote Professor Steven Emerman, who claimed:

*"I have never interacted with a regulatory agency that is so incompetent as the NIEA".*

That is a man who has worked with regulatory agencies across the world, in Ecuador, Columbia, Madagascar, Indonesia, but has:

*"never interacted with a regulatory agency that is so incompetent as the NIEA".*

Minister, how can any of us have any faith in the delivery of the strategy and the direction of travel to get what is expected of it?

**Mr Poots:** It is pretty mean of a politician to denigrate all 900 people who work in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and to have no trust in them. There are a lot of very good people in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. As a body, it could work better. At the moment, it is too silo-based. People specialise in particular areas and sometimes do not see the wider benefit and the necessity for having a bit of give in the area that they are in. However, all in all, I have to say that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency is made up of people who have specialisms and a lot of knowledge in their field of expertise. If we

ultimately develop an independent environment agency, who will populate that? Where do you think the people who are currently in the NIEA will go? It will be the same people, the people whom you have just been running down.

**Mr Allister:** Environmental responsibility is indisputably good. However, I am intrigued by paragraph 11 of the statement, in which Minister Poots states:

*"I am committed to delivering for nature and climate".*

Does the Minister now think that he and, indeed, we can change the climate?

**Mr Poots:** We can certainly alter our environment. When God made this place and looked on it, he said, "It's very good". He did not look on oceans that were full of plastic, rivers that were polluted and air that was full of particles that it should not have. I would like to try to make the environment very good. It would be good for all of us to commit to that.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes questions on the statement. Will Members please take their ease for a moment or two before we move on to the next item in the Order Paper?

## Green Growth Strategy

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that he wishes to make another statement.

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** Following Executive approval on 21 October, I am pleased that, as the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, I can stand here today to present to you the draft green growth strategy. My Department, on behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive, has been leading the development of the green growth strategy, which is an important milestone for Northern Ireland in the fight against climate change. There is widespread recognition that, by continuing to meet our consumption through traditional methods such as fossil fuels, we have a damaging impact on our environment. Green growth means using the move from a high- to a low-emissions society to improve people's quality of life through green jobs and a clean, resilient environment, and that is exactly what we intend to do with the green growth strategy. It is a multi-decade strategy that sets out the long-term vision and a solid framework

for tackling the climate crisis in the right way and helping us to meet our targets to support the UK's goal of achieving net zero by 2050.

I am delighted that the strategy has been agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive. It is something on which we can all work together for a better future for us and for generations to come, and I thank ministerial colleagues for their support. I stress, however, that we, as an Executive, need to show leadership. We need to walk the walk and not just talk the talk, and the draft green growth strategy contains 10 commitments that will ensure that we do just that.

## 11.30 am

I also note that this is something that starts with each one of us: we can all make a difference. Across all sectors, businesses and organisations, and as individuals, we will have choices ahead of us where we must make the right decisions for the environment around us. Our natural environment is one of the most beautiful in the world. Our stunning scenery is world famous, and we must protect it. It is precious to us, and we must do everything that we can to preserve it for future generations: it is our responsibility. We are not starting from scratch: we have already come a long way in reducing our emissions in Northern Ireland, but we can and will do more. We now have an Executive-approved environment strategy, which will be key in setting out our environmental priorities and will help to deliver on the green growth strategy. That will be an important document in dealing with the environmental challenges that we face. I made a statement on the environment strategy this morning.

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

As I mentioned, the draft green growth strategy includes 10 commitments, which will set out how we balance climate action, clean environment and our economy, and it demonstrates how the Executive intend to approach those issues as part of our COVID recovery plan. For example, Ministers have agreed to lead by example through delivering a government estate and fleet with net zero operational carbon emissions and ensuring a green growth-aligned procurement strategy for all government spend. We also aim to embed green growth in all our decision-making. We have committed to ensuring that green growth is central to all our policy and budgetary decisions by introducing a green growth test and making green growth a budgetary priority.

Those commitments represent our aspirations and ambition for the future of Northern Ireland and the impetus that we are placing on taking action now. We want to inspire, support and lead as we embrace new challenges and, indeed, new opportunities.

At this stage, we have not set specific targets. A detailed action plan is being developed, and that will set out what we need to do. It will identify sectors, establish emissions reductions targets and outline the actions that are required to deliver on the commitments in the green growth strategy. We recognise the need, through the green growth strategy, to coordinate planning and delivery across climate, environment and green jobs. By way of example, the energy strategy — an Executive strategy that is being led by the Department for the Economy — provides an ambitious pathway to decarbonising energy. The strategy covers almost 60% of our total emissions and forms an important part of Northern Ireland's overall plan to address climate change. We simply must work together on those important issues, and I am pleased to say that we have been liaising closely with the team that is leading on the development of the energy strategy, as it has an important role to play in achieving our green growth goals.

The draft green growth strategy is underpinned by a set of principles, with the aim of integrating a new way of thinking into how we operate. We want everyone to apply those principles — individuals, businesses, communities and government alike. On implementing those commitments and principles, we must also ensure that the transition to a more sustainable economy is fair and just for everyone. We have a tremendous opportunity to be a part of something, where the journey from a high-emissions to a low-emissions society can bring real benefits and opportunities for everyone.

We can protect our precious environment. It provides the air that we breathe, the food that we eat, the water that we drink and the materials that we use for building. Our way of life is at threat if we do not take care of it. We will create green jobs that develop a whole new skill set and workforce that have a positive impact on the planet. That will bring incredible opportunities and create a stronger economy as we develop and adjust to new ways of working.

We must end our reliance on fossil fuels and find less harmful ways of heating our homes and businesses and fuelling our cars. That, in itself, presents huge opportunities for doing things differently, such as the exciting opportunities that hydrogen brings. We are

already making great progress in that area through the likes of Wrightbus. We must provide opportunities through investment in innovation to help us to advance new ways of working; for example, the potential of using waste streams from agriculture to provide energy, which can also help to solve an environmental issue.

We launched the green growth strategy at Artemis Technologies in Lisburn. It is leading on a project to decarbonise the maritime sector by launching the world's first high-speed, zero-emission passenger ferry. Artemis's design makes high-speed and high-range electric propulsion a commercial viability for the first time. Through working with local universities and companies, comprising experts in the fields of aerospace, motor sport and yacht design, Artemis is creating highly skilled jobs and even has an apprenticeship programme, training people to achieve the skills that they need to work in Artemis. That is a great example of green jobs, and I look forward to seeing what comes next from that company as it continues to innovate in order to solve that issue for the maritime sector.

Through innovation, research and development, investment and the need to think differently, the technology is being developed here on our doorstep to turn problems into solutions. That can be the beginning of a green revolution — the next Industrial Revolution — which can help to rebuild our economy following the COVID-19 crisis. It will require significant long-term investment from the public and private sectors as we work together to adapt to our new and changing priorities.

I am preparing a significant bid to allow my Department to deliver on green growth. It will support the delivery of several major elements of the green growth strategy that DAERA plans to fund. The profile is structured around six themes: agri-food; forestry and nature; the blue economy; the circular economy and waste; public-sector decarbonisation; and rural decarbonisation. I encourage Ministers to consider areas for which they will require funding to deliver on the commitments in the strategy and how they plan to approach them.

This presents major opportunities to create a new skill set and green jobs through the more efficient use of our resources within a circular economy. As well as creating green jobs, we will seek to protect and repurpose existing jobs where possible. In addition to launching the green growth strategy, we have kick-started a period of consultation on the strategy. I encourage you all to respond, as we want to

hear your views. They are important and will inform the final document. We are living the green growth ethos, and, to that effect, we have not printed copies of the draft strategy. It can be found on the DAERA website, where you can also respond to the consultation.

Having attended COP26 last week as part of the UK party delegation, I can only reiterate that the green growth strategy is a first step on our journey in Northern Ireland to addressing the conjoined climate and nature emergencies. As the strategy indicates, we can, will and must act now and make a significant difference. Innovation and collaboration will be critical on our journey to UK net zero and being nature positive. We cannot afford to wait and must act now.

Northern Ireland, as part of the UK, must lead by example in our actions as others look to us for leadership. I am hugely impressed by the innovation and leadership already shown by the private, public and voluntary sectors, and how, when we work together, we can achieve positive outcomes that benefit our climate, biodiversity and economy. We must continue to build on those successes.

Earlier this year, with the agreement of my Executive colleagues, Northern Ireland joined the Under2 Coalition, which brings together 260 Governments representing 1.75 billion people and over 50% of the global economy. The coalition provides a means for those regions and states that are not a signatory party to the COP to show their ambition globally to tackling climate change. From the discussions that I had at COP26 and with members of the Under2 Coalition and ministerial colleagues from other parts of the UK, the Executive must take forward actions to deliver on that ambition in support of the wider UK and global ambitions.

It is clear from my discussions at COP26 that we must tackle climate change and biodiversity loss together in order to secure our health and well-being and to deliver a truly green economy for Northern Ireland. I am encouraged by the examples that we have seen from Northern Ireland and across the UK that, with the right interventions and nature-based solutions, we can, will and must restore our natural capital assets and support a prosperous, low-carbon, high-nature future for all.

The green growth strategy is a big step forward for Northern Ireland as we move from a high- to low-emissions society. This decade — the 2020s — has to be a decade of urgent action. Today, we act. Tomorrow, we thrive.

**Mr McAleer:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Across the island of Ireland, we produce enough food each year for over 15 million people, with the North accounting for about 10 million of that figure. That is thanks to the hard work of farmers and the wider agri-food sector. Will the Minister give us an indication of how the green growth strategy will interact with his future agriculture policy?

**Mr Poots:** The future agriculture policy that we are seeking to establish will recognise that we need to do things differently. Wetting peatlands, for example, will have a consequence. How do we deal with that consequence? Peatlands are critical to all the issues around carbon, because many of them, instead of being carbon stores, are carbon emitters, and we have to deal with that, which will have an impact on those who farm in those areas. Therefore, there is a course of work to do, but it will be tricky and difficult. We have to engage with farmers and deliver a means whereby they can still make a living off the land but, at the same time, we can deal with those carbon emissions. I recognise the challenges. I hope that others will join me in recognising those challenges and will assist me — I do not have all the answers — in finding a way to deliver the best possible outcome. It may not be one that will be universally acceptable to everybody, but we need to find the best possible outcome for as many people as possible.

**Mrs Erskine:** I thank the Minister for his statement. He talked about a significant bid for the green growth strategy. Green growth is a very ambitious path to ensure that Northern Ireland reduces its emissions while continuing to grow the economy here. To deliver on that, we will need an ambitious capital investment programme across the public and private sector. Has the Minister had any discussions with the Finance Minister about that investment?

**Mr Poots:** I have, and, as recently as yesterday, we were discussing those issues. Most of our bids will be capital-related. They will be bids that, in conjunction with the private sector, will introduce significant spend into the local economy and ensure that we start to realistically tackle these things. For example, we talk about the methane on farms. Instead of that methane being lost to the environment, it would be much better to capture it and use it for gas to heat people's homes, particularly rural homes. Sixteen per cent of our emissions come from households, so moving from natural gas boilers, oil boilers and coal fires to using methane and hydrogen will help us to tackle

that 16% and, at the same time, help us to tackle the 27% that comes from farming. Many hundreds of millions of pounds need to be invested over the next number of years to make this happen. Therefore, if the Executive and the Assembly are for real, this Department will need to receive considerable finances to make these things happen.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the Minister for his commentary. I will pick up on the theme that was developed by the Member who asked the previous question. We see the problems that are being created right now by the heavy and almost total reliance on fossil fuels insofar as the cost of heating homes has increased by almost 70%. The consequent deep fuel poverty affects many homes.

I see in the statement that the Executive have agreed to lead by example through delivering change on the government estate. In relation to your bids, Minister, have there been further discussions not just about the government estate — we know of old buildings that are in government ownership — but about social housing, schools and hospitals? The cost of fossil fuels is causing a huge problem for budgets in those areas at the moment. However, if the correct investment is made now to decrease the reliance on fossil fuels, great opportunities for employment will come with that.

**Mr Poots:** The Member asks a valid question. The commitment on the government estate has been made in the green growth strategy, and that is an Executive position, not a DAERA position. Therefore, it is for each Department to identify how best to do that in its area. The Department of Finance is responsible for the estate, and each Department has its own vehicles. Those will have to be changed to a new type of vehicle. That will provide particular challenges for Justice, Health and some other Departments, but we will get there.

The Member mentions housing. We need a significant investment in insulating our homes so that we require less fuel of any kind and have more ambient heat.

That is for the Department for Communities to bring forward.

**11.45 am**

The answers to all the questions about the environment and green growth lie in all of us working together and all Departments working

together. I welcome the fact that there is Executive backing for the strategy.

I will give you an example of something that happened in my constituency some time ago. There was an anaerobic digester that produced methane, but it also produced hot water as a result. It offered that hot water to a local government facility, which turned it down, as it said that it could get hot water cheaper from elsewhere. I do not believe that it was getting it cheaper, but, even if it was, it was obtaining that hot water through the burning of fossil fuels. That is not a way forward. We need to have systems in place to garner all those materials that are currently seen as waste, whether methane, phosphates or nitrates, and turn them into opportunities. We need to look at a lot of the material that currently goes into our black bin and view it no longer as waste but as an opportunity to produce energy.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you, Minister, for your statement. In it, you refer to the:

*"tremendous opportunity to be a part of something, where the journey from a high emissions to a low emissions society can bring real benefits".*

What engagement have you had with your research department to help reduce emissions, such as methane, that are produced on farms?

**Mr Poots:** We have been doing a considerable amount of work with our science division. We are also working closely with the universities and the agri-food sector to create a diamond in that sector. That diamond is about ensuring that we are involved not only in qualitative food production but in getting qualitative environmental results.

In Northern Ireland, and, I have to say, in the Republic of Ireland, we produce really good food. When we go to market our product, and particularly when deals are done with the southern hemisphere — people are concerned about those deals, and rightly so — I want us to be competing not on the basis of selling a commodity but on the basis of selling produce that has provenance and traceability, that demonstrates good animal welfare, that is good for health and that meets good environmental standards. I want us to tick the gold-star box for all those things. When supermarkets, in the UK or elsewhere, look at our produce, I want them to say, "That is what our customer wants, and we will pay a premium for that product, because it is produced to the standards that we require".

Environmentally, we have a bit of work to do to get to the gold-star standard. In many other aspects, we are there, and we can get to that environmental gold-star standard relatively quickly. That will keep us ahead of the market.

**Mr Blair:** I thank the Minister for his statement. We should give it a broad welcome. I am pleased to hear that he is making a bid for funding for commitments made in the strategy. The Chancellor of the UK Government announced a fund of £640 million last year to fund the planting of over 40 million trees and the restoration of 35,000 hectares of peatland in England. The Scottish and Welsh Governments have made similar commitments. The Irish Government have approved an allocation of €108 million for bog rehabilitation plans. I ask the Minister whether his bid includes dedicated funding for peatland restoration.

**Mr Poots:** My bid, which is almost complete, will probably be in the region of, or greater than, what the Member has just described, and it will be for Northern Ireland alone. It is not something that we view as requiring modest amounts to deal with. We have a major problem, and we need to address it. The Scots, for example, are investing some £250 million in peatlands. I think that their peatlands are probably more degraded than ours, however, we have a significant challenge in ensuring that our peatlands come up to the standard that we would like. We have set a period to do that, and there will be a funding envelope to go along with that.

**Mr McGuigan:** Minister, "aspirations", "support", "ambition", "urgent", "vision", "inspire", "lead" and "leadership" are words that are dotted throughout your statement. You said that:

*"We need to walk the walk and not just talk the talk".*

It is as if you are trying to troll us, Minister. Given this statement and its fine words, do you feel embarrassed that, if you have your way, it will fit into an unambitious climate Bill with 82% targets that will allow the North to continue to be a climate laggard?

**Mr Poots:** Probably in the very near future, I will share with people what the Climate Change Committee is anticipating will need to happen to achieve the 82% target and, indeed, the 100% target. The Member can then explain to the public, particularly the rural community, why he thinks that the 82% target should not be there. I think that it should be there and that we need to

identify means of dealing with the problem, not closing down the rural economy. It may be Sinn Féin's policy to destroy the rural economy. It is not mine, and it is not one that I will support. The Member may want to get a quick headline, and he and his party may want to attach themselves to a wonderful headline to show that they are wonderful people. However, we have a world to feed and an environment to look after. If we cannot find a way to do both at one time, we are heading for disaster.

There is no point in replacing one disaster with another. If we cannot feed the world, and if we simply export that greenhouse gas production to another part of the world, and then import it and say, "Look at what wonderful people we are", you are not wonderful people; you are traitors to the people whom you are here to serve. As a Member who represents a rural constituency, I am surprised at just how little the Member appears to care for that rural constituency: for the sheep farmers in the glens of Antrim and the farmers around Dunloy, Loughguile and all those places. What he is proposing will give those people a real hammering and take away their livelihoods.

**Mr Clarke:** Minister, in your statement, you talked about:

*"the need, through the green growth strategy, to coordinate planning".*

My constituency colleague now seems to be coming onside for the incinerator plant, which I welcome, on the Hightown road. Given that there is a need for coordination of planning, surely part of that would be to prevent the continuation of landfill sites, the approval of landfill sites and the potential of landfill sites.

**Mr Poots:** Again, that is a matter for the Infrastructure Minister. It is great that not all of the controversial decisions rest with me and that somebody else has to make some. I do not envy the Infrastructure Minister in dealing with those issues, but they need to be dealt with.

The truth is that we put all of this stuff in a bin, the lorry pulls up in the morning and away it goes. That is it gone; wonderful. However, what is our responsibility? We do our recycling. We have brown bins and green bins, and we have this other material that goes into another bin. What do people think happens with that? It currently goes to landfill, it is producing methane and it is not the best way to deal with that waste. We know that. Therefore, number one, we need to take more stuff out of that bin and, number two, the material that goes into the

bin — the residue — needs to be dealt with in a better way than going to landfill.

We need to make that decision. Whatever it happens to be and whether it is an incinerator at Hightown or something else, we need to set out deliverables, and those things need to happen in this decade. If we do not do it within this decade, there will be no point talking about the environment and saying that we want to protect it, because we will be failing it.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Minister, if we are to have a rural and farming community in the future, as Mr McGuigan and I want, and as, I believe, you also want, the farming and rural community will require intensive support from you, as Agriculture Minister. Given your almost Damascus-style conversion to green politics, which must have happened somewhere on the road to Glasgow, how will you support a just transition for workers and families, whether they are on the land or somewhere else? In order to help that just transition and to protect rural communities and families, will you put in place a transition commission to oversee it and to ensure that everyone is treated fairly?

**Mr Poots:** I have to make a wee confession to the Member. While in the early part of this millennium his party's former president was hugging trees, I was planting them. We will deal with conversions in due course.

The Member is right, however: we need a just transition. We need to find a means of providing a just transition for farmers who live close to peatlands and who will, therefore, be challenged. We need to find a just transition for people who own chicken and other poultry units. To me, that is about capturing the ammonia the units produce and reutilising it. It is not about closing down poultry houses. They are very efficient ways of producing proteins that humans consume. We need a just transition for people who are dairy farming so that they can not only continue to produce milk but be supported to capture methane. We need a just transition for people who produce beef.

I was with Al Gore on Saturday. I am sure lots of people think that Al Gore has done tremendous things on the environment, so they will give cognisance to what he has to say. If they do not listen to me, they may listen to him. He says that one of the greatest storages of carbon, second only to forests, is soil. I therefore posed this question to the former vice president: what is the best thing to grow on that soil? If we grow crops, we are continually ploughing and tilling the soil, which releases carbon, but growing grass captures carbon. The

consequence of capturing that carbon provides sequestration. What do you then do with the grass? Do you just not use it, or do you populate it with animals, which will produce proteins that people will be able to eat in order to sustain themselves?

The logical outcome to all that is that we need to ensure that we can continue producing good food in Northern Ireland for a growing population in the world so that we can help to ensure that we feed that population for generations to come while doing so in as environmentally friendly a way as possible.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the Minister for his statement. We would all love to see more transitioning from fossil fuels to cleaner renewable initiatives for green growth and farming. How is his Department working with farmers and farmers' unions to assist our farmers with a just transition?

**Mr Poots:** Just short of 10% of greenhouse gas emissions from farms comes from machinery. As we work with companies such as JCB, which is totally committed to hydrogen, we will see opportunities to move to vehicles that are powered mainly by hydrogen. Farmers will not be able to afford to buy new vehicles straight away, but, given the contracting that takes place, the shift will happen relatively quickly for the vast majority of the work that is done on farms.

There is that 10%. You can significantly tackle that.

## 12.00 noon

Fertiliser also accounts for just short of 10%. If we anaerobically digest more materials and capture the methane that is one element of that, we will be able to use that digestate more appropriately on our land. We will, perhaps, need to separate it, but we can use it more appropriately, and that will reduce the amount of fertiliser that we need. You can make a significant reduction there, particularly by using less equipment to spread it.

Fifty-seven percent of the emissions come from the animals. By working with qualitative research in recent years — for example, there has already been significant success with reducing crude protein — we now produce two thirds of the carbon emissions from dairy products that were previously produced. There has been significant success there. It is clear to us that efficiency is important, but we are looking at how we can add other things, such

as seaweed, to feed to ensure that we drive methane down further.

Research is also being done at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), whereby the cows have a hood applied to their nose so that, when they take the grass into the rumen and regurgitate it and burp, the gas is caught in the hood and filtered out. That takes out over half of the methane that is burped. At the other side, we capture the slurry and anaerobically digest it.

You can see where I am coming from: we can build a picture where we are not removing small percentages of methane from agri-food but removing substantial amounts of greenhouse gases and methane from the production of agri-food. That will enable us, on one hand, to sustain an industry and, on the other, to do that in an environmentally friendly way. That will take time, investment and an awful lot of common sense. I appeal to the House to demonstrate to the wider public in Northern Ireland that there is a little of that here.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Of course, we will be supportive of the green growth strategy as it comes forward.

I note, with interest, that the Minister talked about the blue economy. When we were talking about issues to do with green hydrogen and methane, he rightly called out the very innovative approach taken by Artemis Technologies, looking towards the marine sector as well.

The Minister will be aware that the United Kingdom is pushing towards an increasing part of our GDP being spent on research and development to bring it up to 2.4%, but Northern Ireland is at the abysmally low level of 0.8%. Can the Minister outline his vision for bringing together all of the Executive and all the sectors across Northern Ireland to make sure that we capitalise on both the ammonia project and green hydrogen?

**Mr Poots:** Well, as one of the Departments that probably have investment in science and research that is considerably higher than 0.8% — I will get the Member the figure — realistically, we can move forward on a really positive future for Northern Ireland only if we invest in research and development. With science, innovation and technology, we will develop answers to address the problems that we face. It is incumbent on us to invest in science, innovation and technology if we are to achieve that faster. I agree with the Member that we need to invest in all of the things he

mentioned, as well as in research and development. Without doing that, we will quickly fall behind and will be leaning on others to do that work. I am much keener that AFBI, for example, sells its research to other parts of the world, having delivered for Northern Ireland.

**Mr Boylan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Given the focus on producing clean, renewable energy and the cross-departmental nature of the strategy, as well as the fact that climate targets mean that we cannot use all of the petroleum reserves that we currently know of, will the Minister encourage the Department for the Economy to put a halt to all licensing for petroleum exploration? I hope that, after attending COP26, the Minister has finally copped on.

**Mr Poots:** The Member represents a rural community. The energy strategy is an important element of the work that is being done by the Department for the Economy. As I indicated, the strategy accounts for around 60% of emissions, so it is important that the Department gets that energy strategy right. The Department is close to the end of it. Hopefully, in the near future, you will be able to question the Minister directly on his intentions.

Northern Ireland is uniquely placed to benefit from hydrogen. We have, I think, the capacity for over 50% renewables now, but we are not utilising all of that capacity because we do not have the ability to do that or to store it. How can we push that up? I pressed at COP26 the need for us to have green bank opportunities so that people who want to install solar panels but struggle to borrow money, for example, to do it will have the ability to do that. It pays itself back in about five years. The landowners who want to introduce further wind energy should be able to find that support and have the ability to do that without having to rely on large companies to come in and do it.

Of course, we need to develop offshore wind energy. That will be controversial. Some people will not like it, but, if we are to face the challenge of having renewable energy instead of using fossil fuels, it is absolutely necessary. We have to do it. That is not to say that we will just cover all of Northern Ireland's coastline with wind turbines. Applications will come in and will need to go through all of the processes to enable that to happen. On producing that renewable energy, we will electrolyse it and turn it into hydrogen, which we can run our buses, lorries and tractors on. I hope that, in future, we will run our cars on it. That is much more reliable and environmentally friendly than extracting lithium, cobalt and all sorts of

minerals from Africa, using dodgy techniques in some places to do so. Northern Ireland is uniquely placed to do that. Our gas pipe network is capable of carrying hydrogen because it is a plastic network as opposed to being metal. We can provide biomethane to people's homes. We can switch from using fossil fuels to renewable fuels over a reasonable period, but that adjustment needs to start soon.

**Ms Armstrong:** Thank you, Minister. I am disappointed that the conversation with you today about the issue has become very dour. It is a strategy that we should celebrate. It is a cross-Executive strategy.

In February 2020, the Assembly declared a climate emergency. Thank you very much for bringing forward the green growth strategy as it is today. I hoped that you would have included a green growth impact assessment to hold all of our feet to the fire and make sure that we deliver on it.

You talked about cross-departmental working. One of the things that we can improve on, of course, is how our homes are heated. You mentioned that just now with regard to hydrogen. The Communities Committee is taking forward the Private Tenancies Bill. That needs to have some consideration of energy performance certificates. The Economy Department is working on that. Will you assure the House that, in the three-year Budget that will come forward, capital investment will be secured to enable all homes to have those energy performance certificates so that we can, at long last, be free of the hold of fossil fuels on our houses?

**Mr Poots:** That is an issue for another Minister to deliver; I believe that that is the Minister for Communities. It demonstrates the importance of cross-departmental working. The Department of Finance, for example, is responsible for building regulations. The Department for Communities is responsible for housing. The Department for the Economy is responsible for energy, and we, of course, have an important role in all of this. The combination of all of those Departments working closely together will deliver the outcomes that the Member wants.

She is absolutely right: as I indicated, households account for 16% of emissions. We can get quick wins in that regard. Ultimately, my vision is to heat people's homes and run vehicles with hydrogen and biomethane. That will help to sustain an economy that already exists here, largely the agricultural economy, and to ensure that we have renewable energy. I

hear people say, "Why not continue to burn cheap fossil fuels?". I am clear that we are not in control of whether they are cheap: Vladimir Putin and the sheikhs in Saudi Arabia and other places are in control of that. I would much prefer to have renewable energy that is produced in Northern Ireland, the cost of which we will know every year and will not be particularly variable. That will mean that we can give homes and people across Northern Ireland energy security, because the energy is produced here. We will also be able to give them security in the cost, because the adjustments will be modest, single-digit percentage changes as opposed to the massive changes that we have seen this winter.

**Mr O'Toole:** Minister, you mentioned two low-carbon manufacturers — Artemis and Wrightbus — and said that we were uniquely placed to benefit from hydrogen. Minister, it does not happen too often, but I agree with you: there are great low-carbon manufacturers here. I do not want to have an argument about this, but I ask you explore, in developing the green growth strategy, our potential from having access to two different markets in exporting low-carbon manufactured goods. The UK Government are developing the UK green industrial revolution, and the European Union has the green deal. We in this jurisdiction, because of our post-Brexit arrangements, have the unique opportunity to export low-carbon goods into the UK and European markets. Will you look at that unique potential as part of the green growth strategy? We can be a green industrial hub at the centre of two markets to all our benefit.

**Mr Poots:** We need to look at every opportunity. I agree with the Member that we should take every advantage that exists for us. Northern Ireland was at the forefront of the industrial revolution, and Belfast was a hub. This place was thriving 120 years ago at the turn of the 20th century, and we can be a thriving hub once again through green technologies. Some people may deride that and say that it is wishful thinking. I named two companies — Wrightbus and Artemis — and there are lots more out there, so we should not focus entirely on two. However, I look at what they are doing and see that Artemis is projecting a £6 billion turnover for this project over the next 30 years and has received significant investment to achieve that.

The opportunities that exist are vast. Probably no one in the 1980s anticipated the opportunities that would come through tech, and therefore we need to grasp the opportunities. Irrespective of what Governments

think, the big businesses in the world will want to acquire only the products that come from environmentally responsible producers. Therefore, those who want to lag behind will do themselves out of opportunities and will not have a future because large companies will not want to do business with them.

**Mr Allister:** I am sure that, as was alluded to earlier, many of the poultry farmers in my constituency would, first and foremost, like to have heard about the long-awaited ammonia strategy. In respect of this strategy, of course one will look for significant private investment, but the Minister's vision will, of necessity, involve considerable public purse expenditure. Surely, there has been some scoping of that. I do not expect a precise figure, but can the Minister give us an indication of the demands on the public purse to deliver what he is talking about today?

**Mr Poots:** Over the next five years, my Department will bid for somewhere in the region of £0.75 billion for investment.

Most of that will be capital. Much of it will create opportunities and jobs and, at the same time, tackle significant environmental problems here. That is the reality. That is why I have tried to spell out for people that this does not come without pain and investment. It will also require significant investment from the private sector and the wider public. So, when we get up and make fine statements, we need to recognise that there is no cheap or easy way to deliver on those fine statements.

**12.15 pm**

**Mr McNulty:** I welcome the statement and any initiatives to help our biodiversity, environment and green economy. However, what I do not get from this statement or the previous one is a sense of urgency. We need a flashing green light on the roof of this place telling us that we are in a climate emergency.

There is no mention of the reintroduction of species or of species that are under threat. There is no mention of big picture items that will really make an impact. I do not see that ambition here, Minister. Forgive me if I am not getting it, but I do not sense that ambition. We need a flashing green light on the roof of this place telling us that there is a climate emergency.

**Mr Poots:** The reintroduction of species will be dealt with in the biodiversity strategy. The green growth strategy is about ensuring that we take

the right steps environmentally to address a range of issues and, at the same time, allow our economy to grow. Some people might think that you cannot do both. I am absolutely confident that not only can we do both but we will do both because we have innovative people out there who are working right across our country doing wonderful things. The more that we can hook up and connect to those people and facilitate and assist them in what they are doing, the more quickly we will get the necessary turnaround and change that the Member desires.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** That concludes questions to the Minister on his statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before we move on to the next item of business.

## Committee Business

### Review of the Adequacy and Effectiveness of the Statement of Entitlements for an Official Opposition at the Northern Ireland Assembly

**Mr Weir (The Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee):** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes the report of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on the outcome of the independent review of the adequacy and effectiveness of the statement of entitlements for an official Opposition [NIA 137/17-22]; further notes that this addresses the applicable recommendation in paragraph 3.7 of annex C of 'New Decade, New Approach'; and calls on the Assembly to approve the Committee's recommendations contained in the report.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Business Committee has agreed to allocate one and a half hours for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. I call the Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee to open the debate.

**Mr Weir:** It says in my notes:

*"I rise on behalf of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee to move this motion."*

"Rise" might be slightly inappropriate terminology, but, on behalf of the Committee, I am happy to move the motion. I do not intend to go into the details of the report's recommendations. Others will have the opportunity to do so. The details are self-explanatory, but I will highlight some key aspects of the proposals in a moment. It is also important to give Members a bit of the background to the report.

With reference to the second limb of the motion, the Committee's report stems from the applicable recommendations in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA), which states, amongst other things:

*"The parties recognise that additional funding should be made available to parties who form the Opposition."*

Secondly, it states:

*"the relevant Assembly authorities should also commission a review of the adequacy and effectiveness of the Statement of Entitlements for an Official Opposition".*

Thirdly, it states:

*"An appropriate independent person should be appointed to conduct such a review".*

Fourthly, it states:

*"The review should recommend increased allowances for Opposition parties and should explore the creation of additional funding for the Offices of the Leaders of Opposition parties."*

Clearly, the NDNA recommendations anticipated additional financial support for parties forming an official Opposition. Therefore, the key questions for the review to address were, essentially, these: what should be the level of financial assistance, and what, if any, adjustments or enhancements should be made to the existing procedural arrangements?

Following liaison between the Committee and the Assembly Commission, on 13 October 2020, the Assembly passed a resolution referring to the Committee the responsibility for taking forward the review. The terms of reference for the review were subsequently agreed between the Committee and the Assembly Commission, and, following a public procurement exercise, the Committee appointed Mr Trevor Reaney, former Clerk to the Assembly, as the independent person to undertake the review exercise. Mr Reaney's review exercise included research and consultation phases, with the latter involving extensive engagement with the political parties and independent Members.

Following receipt of Mr Reaney's report, and in accordance with the review's terms of reference, the Committee sought responses from the Assembly Commission and the Committee on Procedures on, respectively, the financial and procedural implications arising from the review recommendations. The Committee also invited responses from the Assembly parties and independent Members. The responses that were received have been

reflected in and appended to the Committee's report.

Turning briefly to the Committee's consideration of the review recommendations, I highlight upfront that the Committee is generally supportive of the proposals that Mr Reaney has brought forward. The Committee, in setting out its position on each of the review's recommendations, has focused on their practical implementation. There are just two fairly minor exceptions regarding recommendations 6 and 14, which I will come to in a moment.

The 18 review recommendations fall under three main groupings. The first group comprises recommendations 1 to 5, which are of a general nature. The Committee commends those five recommendations for formal adoption by the Assembly. In particular, the Committee saw as fair and balanced the guiding principle in review recommendation 1, which states:

*"the resources, profile and status provided for the official Opposition should not of themselves be an incentive or a disincentive to opt for official Opposition."*

The second group comprises review recommendations 6 to 11, which cover procedural entitlements. Again, the Committee calls for the Assembly to approve the implementation of those recommendations, save for one aspect of review recommendation 6, which I will explain briefly. Mr Reaney, when presenting his report to the Committee last June, highlighted an anomaly in the current arrangements for Matters of the Day whereby an official Opposition would be entitled to be first contributor after the tabling Members. Mr Reaney pointed out that Matters of the Day are designed not to be on Government business and are, therefore, not an occasion for holding the Executive to account.

Although Mr Reaney did not make a recommendation in his report on addressing that anomaly, the Committee agreed that it would call on the Assembly to approve recommendation 6, with the exception of enhanced speaking rights for Matters of the Day. I should point out that, when the report was being drawn up, the new format of Members' Statements had not appeared. As with Matters of the Day, we do not believe that the procedure falls into the category of Government business, to which enhanced speaking rights attach.

The third group deals with the financial assistance for an official Opposition and

comprises review recommendations 12 to 17. Particular consideration was given to recommendation 12, which contains the proposed increase in resources. Members discussed whether, on the one hand, the proposed level of financial uplift would be adequate to provide for an effective official Opposition and whether, on the other hand, it would incentivise parties to go into opposition, which would be contrary to recommendation 1. Arising from the discussion, the Committee acknowledged the basis on which Mr Reaney calculated the proposed increase in resources and agreed that recommendation 12 should be approved by the Assembly.

As I alluded to earlier, the Committee supports part of recommendation 14, which advocates detailed guidance on the funding conditions associated with the financial assistance for political parties (FAPP) scheme. The Committee, however, concurs with the Assembly Commission's view that there is not a convincing case for a salary cap to be included in a revised FAPP scheme, as parties assign differing priorities to the activities that are funded under the FAPP scheme. Otherwise, the Committee supports the recommendations on financial assistance, as well as recommendation 18 on access to information.

As Chair, I conclude by confirming that, subject to the motion's being agreed, the Committee will take forward recommendations 3, 11 and 18, the implementation of which will fall to the AERC or, given the timing, its successor in the next mandate. I look forward to hearing the contributions of other Members to the debate.

I will make some brief remarks on my own behalf and that of the DUP. The report does not simply build on NDNA but seeks to implement the legislative proposal in John McCallister's private Member's Bill from a previous mandate on Opposition entitlements. To a certain extent, the recommendations bring us closer to a form of normalisation, but it is important that, in moving forward — the detail will largely be brought forward by the Assembly Commission and the Committee on Procedures — we seek always to strike a balance. I think of the overriding recommendation, in recommendation 1, that an Opposition should be neither incentivised nor disincentivised.

That is true of the procedural and financial aspects. Procedurally, it is important that an Opposition be given their place and opportunity and, similarly, that they be adequately resourced financially. We also need to be careful, however, because we are not in a normal situation. I am conscious of the need for

balance not simply between Government and Opposition but among parties. As someone who has served in most capacities in the Chamber — as Back-Bench Member, Committee Chair and Minister — I see that a balance of resources among parties is important in order to ensure that, whether you are in the Opposition or a Back-Bench Member of a party in the Government, a particular advantage is not given to you.

It is therefore important that the detail of the procedures and the financial aspects be drilled down into so that we have that balance and so that being in opposition is neither incentivised nor disincentivised. It is about trying to be fair to all 90 Members and all parties in the Chamber. As we move forward with what can be completed in this mandate, which will principally be some of the procedural aspects, and look ahead to the next mandate, it is important that we strike a fair balance for everyone. I commend the report to the Assembly and look forward to hearing Members' contributions to the debate.

**12.30 pm**

**Ms Ní Chuilín (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures):** Before I begin my comments, I wish Peter well and a speedy recovery, and I put on record my condolences on the sad loss of his mother.

Following a briefing from Trevor Reaney, whom I, on behalf of the Committee, thank for the report, the Committee was pleased to review and respond to the draft recommendations. The Committee's response to AERC focused on those recommendations that are likely to require procedural changes, namely recommendations 4, 6, 7, 8, 10 and 11. I will try to briefly reflect the Committee's view on each of the procedural recommendations in turn.

The Committee's view was that recommendation 4 may not, in fact, require a change to Standing Orders. The Committee suggested that AERC liaise with the Assembly Commission on whether an amendment to Standing Orders would be required or whether it could be accommodated as an element of the review of the FAPP scheme.

Recommendation 6 recommends the continuation of the current arrangements for enhanced speaking rights. The Committee thought it would, again, be possible that existing arrangements could be continued without a change to Standing Orders. On the other hand, the Committee agreed that, if recommendation 7 of the report were accepted by the Assembly,

an amendment to Standing Order 20(7) could be accommodated to allow the first question for oral answer to Ministers to come from the official Opposition.

The Committee made the most comment in its response to recommendation 8, which highlighted that, during a previous Committee on Procedures' review of provisions for Standing Orders, as set out in the Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the Committee had not been able to establish that there would be cross-party support to introduce some of the Standing Orders necessary to give that recommendation effect. If recommendation 8 is agreed by the Assembly today, the Committee on Procedures will need to further consider a range of issues with the intent of bringing forward new draft Standing Orders to be agreed by the Assembly with cross-community support. Those issues are: the formation of the Opposition, including qualification; the timing of the formation of the Opposition; the dissolution of the Opposition; the leadership of the Opposition; topical questions from the leadership of the Opposition; speaking rights in the Assembly; enhanced speaking rights for the Opposition; and the Opposition's right to chair the Public Accounts Committee.

I move to the Committee's consideration of recommendation 10. The Committee agreed that, as a proportional representation formula is applied to the allocation of seats on Statutory Committees, it is likely that any official Opposition will already have the opportunity to be represented on all Statutory Committees. The Committee agreed that it could seek to bring forward an amendment to Standing Orders in respect of the balance of parties.

The last procedural recommendation in the report is recommendation 11 on political and technical groups. The Committee agreed that there are no procedural obstacles to making provision for political or technical groups via changes to Standing Orders. However, the Committee also reflected that further detailed information and research would be required in order to inform the development of any future procedures.

Finally, should the Assembly accept the recommendations contained in the AERC report, the Committee on Procedures will seek to take forward those recommendations that relate to its role as a matter of priority. Although the Committee is currently very busy, we appreciate that the report says:

*"That all recommendations should be implemented in a timely manner and that all Standing Orders should ideally be in place before the end of the current Assembly mandate."*

That recommendation will obviously inform our approach to that work.

**Mr McGrath:** I welcome the opportunity to participate in today's debate. It is an important one for the House, and I hope that it signals the maturing and development of the institutions. In the transition to peaceful and democratic means, the best available option of government, so far, has been an all-party Executive. However, having all the parties in the Executive has hindered a key cornerstone of democracy: the role of scrutinising the Executive for the policies that they make, the decisions that they take and the laws that they enact. If we are honest, we have struggled with that role. On far too many occasions in this place, when Ministers have been asked questions that they may not want to hear or answer, the response has been, "But your Minister is in the Executive". That is not good governance, it is not good for democracy and it is not good for the people of the North. It is just not good enough.

The SDLP welcomes the review, which aims to provide structure and guidance for an official Opposition. That was a commitment in the NDNA agreement, and I welcome the fact that the Committee has worked so quickly to produce the report. I thank Trevor Reaney for his work in completing the body of work for the Committee. The report contains 18 recommendations. We are fairly supportive of the majority of recommendations, relaxed about a number of others and feel that a number do not go as far as they could. However, I accept that it is a consensus Committee approach and that not everybody will get what they want.

I will go into the details. Review recommendations 1 to 5, 9 and 14 to 17 largely deal with the implementation and smooth operation of an official Opposition. We are fairly content with those recommendations. Recommendation 6 caused considerable conversation. Our perspective on it is that if you are going to have an effective Opposition, the first person to speak after the Executive member should come from the Opposition. Recommendation 6 enables that; however, we feel that the first element, which is on questions for oral answer, needs more work. Recommendations 7 and 8 attempt to address the concerns that we have, so we are happy to see that they are there and could be adopted.

We still have concerns that some of the outworkings of recommendations 10 and 11 may, on the face of it, appear undemocratic, as they could provide a leg up or enhanced status for party groupings of a size that do not warrant it. We continue to urge caution and reflection on those recommendations.

Recommendations 12 and 13 reflect the need for appropriate finance for an official Opposition. It is quite clear that, if we want to have an effective Opposition, we will have to be prepared to resource it effectively. Finally, with regard to recommendation 18, we need to see a significant increase in the maturity in and approach with information that is forthcoming from Departments. I mentioned Ministers being asked questions that they do not want to answer. For too long, Ministers have been given cover to hide behind cagily worded answers to questions for oral answers, taken too long to answer questions for written answer or simply not answered them. That has been our experience, yet we are told that we are in an Executive together. If that was the case for an Opposition, it would be totally unacceptable. An Opposition must be given access to information in a timely manner.

An Opposition are a good thing. They allow for democratic accountability and for an Executive to make better laws, provide sustainability for the institutions and mean that we serve people better. Ultimately, that should be our guiding principle in this place every day.

**Ms Armstrong:** First, I offer my condolences to my fellow Strangford MLA Peter Weir. I also wish him well as he recovers. If you need me to push you round the doors during campaigning, Peter, I am certainly happy to do that.

**Mr Weir:** Is that with your leaflets or mine?  
[Laughter.]

**Ms Armstrong:** I rise as a member of the Alliance Party to support the report produced by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and to ask that its actions are taken forward before the end of this mandate in order to enable entitlements for an official Opposition in the mandate after the next election, which, as we know, is expected in May 2022. The review of the statement of entitlements for an official Opposition arose from 'New Decade, New Approach', which confirmed:

*"The parties recognise that additional funding should be made available to parties who form the Opposition. In the context of the agreed programme of measures to*

*enhance the sustainability of the institutions, the relevant Assembly authorities should also commission a review of the adequacy and effectiveness of the Statement of Entitlements for an Official Opposition as set out in the Fresh Start Agreement."*

The Institute for Government confirms that, historically and constitutionally, the Opposition are understood to have three main roles:

*"to oppose the government, to criticize [sic] it and to seek to replace it".*

I have issues with our political system. A recent Alliance Party motion highlighted that, in a cross-community vote, my vote and the votes of those who are designated as "other" are not treated the same as the votes of those of other designations. I also have issue with the mandatory coalition. We have witnessed in the House how parties that will never share political ideology are in the Executive together but work in silos not trusting each other, not sharing budgets and delivering a far-from-exemplary government for Northern Ireland. It is time we had an official Opposition that can hold our Government to account. The AERC has provided recommendations to enable such an Opposition to finally, but not fairly, be a key element in the Assembly.

As we know, the AERC is comprised of representation from most parties, as decided under the D'Hondt system. I have been the Alliance member of the AERC since the Assembly returned in 2020. As part of the Committee, we established the review's terms of reference and advertised for an independent person to undertake it, and here we are today with the AERC report in front of the Assembly.

The Committee agreed a number of recommendations. As the report requests, those recommendations, if agreed by the House, should now progress to the Procedures Committee or the Assembly Commission to be acted upon. However, if a cross-community vote is used to take forward some of those items, it will mean that I will not get to have a vote that will be treated in the same way.

The Procedures Committee will be tasked with taking forward a number of the recommendations, but I draw Members' attention to recommendation 8, through which the Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 will be fully implemented. The Act already defined how the Opposition should be formulated. It enabled parties that turned down a Ministry to enter opposition. We already saw the outworkings of

that in 2016 when the SDLP and UUP formed the Opposition. However, not all of the Act was implemented in 2016. Parties that were not entitled to a Ministry but that met the qualifying threshold of having 8% of Members should have been able to join the Opposition but were denied that opportunity. Recommendation 8 fixes that.

Recommendation 12 provides the Opposition with access to resources. It will be up to the Assembly Commission to revise the FAPP scheme to ensure that a reasonable level of financial support is available to Opposition parties for them to deliver the effective scrutiny of Government, as happens in other Parliaments, including Westminster.

The AERC did not agree to the salary cap for staff employed to support Opposition parties. That is because we have already seen how the Members' determination places such an unfair cap on staff, preventing them from accessing a cost-of-living increase. I fully expect there to be a salary scale like the one for MLAs' staff. The new FAPP scheme will allow staff who reach the top of the salary scale to have the opportunity to be awarded a cost-of-living increase, if there is one.

Importantly, the recommendations proposed today will mean a significant change to the way in which the Northern Ireland Civil Service deals with Members who are not part of the Government parties. By having an official Opposition, the Civil Service will have to provide adequate access to information from Ministers and their Departments. The AERC considered how to ensure transparency and access to information in recommendation 18 and asks that it is tasked to explore how best to progress such access either in this term or to review and implement it in the next term. It also means that Committee papers must be made available to Government and Opposition parties. That is a very welcome change to processes. It will make for better scrutiny —

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

**Ms Armstrong:** — and all of us know why it is important to do that since the renewable heat incentive (RHI) inquiry. It is important to note that, if parties in an official Opposition are designated as "other", the Opposition vote will not count in a cross-community vote. That needs to be considered.

**Mr Butler:** I echo the sentiments that have been offered to Mr Weir on the death of his

mother. I wish him a speedy recovery from his foot injury.

I rise not as a member of the AERC but as a member of the Ulster Unionist Party. We welcome the 'Review of the Adequacy and Effectiveness of the Statement of Entitlements for an Official Opposition at the Northern Ireland Assembly' report. It is absolutely necessary. I think that everybody will attest that the provisions are necessary to ensure that any Opposition that are formed are robust and resourced appropriately.

One of the most important things that we can do relates to the review mechanism, which is much needed in order to ensure that we provide value for money as well as an effective Opposition. In the last mandate, we had only nine months as the Opposition in 2016. There were nine months that showed what an Opposition might do. Mr Allister probably will blink at this, but some may say that there is evidence in other quarters, particularly from Mr Allister, of what an effective Opposition can do in relation to their tone and how they hold the Executive to account. However, we need to formalise that and to ensure that the structures are there for the parties that qualify and those of any other nature, as the Member for Strangford said.

The Good Friday Agreement was a really important agreement in 1998. We subscribe to it, and we talk about it in and around NDNA, and we want to go back to its intent and purpose. However, we are in 2021, and the need has been proven for our Executive to be held to a high level of accountability and scrutiny. I hope that the recommendations that we have before us today will provide the framework to do that, if any of the parties wish to do so in 2022.

**12.45 pm**

Opposition exists, as has been said, to keep government in check and to ensure that the appropriate checks and balances are in place and that we have high levels of scrutiny of our decision makers. It has been difficult over the past two years to do that in the manner in which it should have been done, because we have been living through the COVID pandemic. I have said before in the Chamber that every Minister has probably done their best, but, sometimes, that is not enough, when we scrutinise the decisions that have been taken, especially in Departments. When we move out of the COVID pandemic and following the election in May 2022, it will be really important that we have the structures in place.

I think back to our experience in opposition. We demonstrated, in principle and in practice, that there is a need for opposition. It will drive better government in Northern Ireland, but it needs to have that toolkit. That was one of the things that we discovered. There was a realisation on the workings of an Opposition that there are things that need to be refined and things that need to be tested appropriately. Those have been picked up in the report. A lot of it is in and around the Statutory Committees by default, the enhanced speaking rights in the Chamber, the additional research capabilities and the additional resource under the FAPP scheme. It is right and proper, as picked up in recommendation 1, that opposition should neither be incentivised nor de-incentivised. However, one of the fiscal realities — we agree with what has been reported — is that opposition parties need to have the same ability as Executive parties to reach into the resources, especially for spads. The reality is that some of our top spads are paid incredibly high amounts of money, which possibly is not reflected in this. If an Opposition proved to be effective, I am sure that we could revisit that in a number of years.

We currently do not have an Opposition. As I said, had there been one during the pandemic, they might have proven to provide better scrutiny. Perhaps in the next mandate we will see in this place, even though it may not come naturally to us, an Opposition adding quality to an Executive who are a shared Government. I think that they would do so. We are pleased with the recommendations that are before us today, and I ask all Members to support them.

**Mr G Kelly:** I give my condolences to Peter as well and wish him a speedy recovery. It was the first meeting that I have ever been to that someone not only joined but chaired via Zoom from hospital.

I thank Trevor Reaney for his helpful report to the Committee; the Chair went through that at some length, so I will not.

The review, as mentioned, was part of 'New Decade, New Approach', which states:

*"The review should recommend increased allowances for Opposition parties and should explore the creation of additional funding for the Offices of the Leaders of Opposition parties."*

Sinn Féin supports that recommendation. However, we believe that any decisions in that regard must also be affordable and provide value for money. In most democratic

assemblies, government office is not available to parties with smaller political mandates. It is, therefore, our view that parties should be encouraged to take up the opportunity to play a full part in the power-sharing arrangements. If parties choose not to take up that option on behalf of those who voted for them and instead choose to absent themselves from political office, they should, of course, be funded appropriately for their oppositional role. We must take full account of the unique power-sharing arrangements that derive from the Good Friday Agreement, which provide parties with sufficient support to avail themselves of the opportunity to hold ministerial office. However, it is important that, in the interests of the most efficient operation of the political institutions and to provide the most effective representation, elected parties should not be financially attracted into opposition. As mentioned in recommendation 1, that is at the centre of a lot of what we talk about on resources and procedures. The support available to opposition parties should not disadvantage other parties that choose to provide responsible leadership to the Executive. Any financial increase needs to take that into account and, critically, needs to be affordable, as I mentioned.

In that context, I ask the Assembly to approve AERC's recommendations on the outcome of the independent review, as laid out in the motion.

**Mr Muir:** I welcome the report that has been brought to the Assembly today and emphasise that what has been agreed in the report needs to be implemented as soon as possible and ideally before the end of the mandate. As I will detail, it is vital that we all work to ensure that legislation and Standing Orders are updated swiftly to reflect the work and progress that has been made in the House.

Updating provisions for an official Opposition will, ultimately, give greater powers to parties that choose not to form part of the Executive, and we welcome that change. The recommendations in the report will ensure that any future official Opposition will be properly funded, allowing for adequate staffing to support the effectiveness of official opposition, and will provide clear, detailed information on the role of opposition versus government.

Whilst the Alliance Party supports the motion, it is important that we recognise that Northern Ireland is still a post-conflict society and power-sharing is vital. I also note that the idea of an official Opposition is not a utopia, and, in many instances, the practicalities are very different from what we were led to believe.

Recommendation 4 states:

*"If the official Opposition comprises more than one party, that the parties involved should develop and publish operating procedures for their voluntary grouping in relation to the business of the Assembly."*

We acknowledge that all parties in the House have different views on a number of big issues. It is worthwhile to note the difficulties that could arise in the formation of an Opposition comprising more than one party.

It is deeply frustrating that we still await the updating of Standing Orders in relation to all aspects of what I would consider to be John McCallister's 2016 Act, to make provision, for example, for an annual debate on the Executive's legislative timescale. That means that, although legislation has been passed, it has not been reflected in Standing Orders and does not currently take place. An annual debate, for example, on the Executive's legislative timescale would be useful to ensure that we are focused on passing legislation that is improving our society and moving Northern Ireland forward. Other Standing Orders need to be developed to reflect the 2016 Act, with 10 sections of the Act not currently reflected in our Standing Orders.

Recommendation 5 states:

*"That all recommendations should be implemented in a timely manner and that all Standing Orders should ideally be in place before the end of the current Assembly mandate."*

Following on from my previous comments, I encourage that that recommendation be given considerable attention and that we ensure that Standing Orders are updated before the end of the current mandate. Failure to do so could result in a situation where, subsequent to the forthcoming election, any parties that wished to form an official Opposition and avail themselves of the opposition legislation would be inhibited because Standing Orders did not match the law of the land.

We are now months away from the end of the Assembly mandate. It is vital that we act now to ensure that matters are updated to reflect the recommendations in the AERC report and that any party may choose to form an official Opposition when the Assembly returns next spring and will have adequate guidance, representation, resources and finance.

In conclusion, I echo two things: the first is that opposition is not the utopia that some people sell it as. These institutions are built on power-sharing, and we need to reflect that and remember it. I also offer my condolences, as I have done personally, to Peter on the loss of his mother.

**Mr Allister:** A Parliament and a Government without an official Opposition is a sham and a travesty of democracy. Ask any GCSE politics class what the features are that denote a working, viable, worthwhile democracy, and I guarantee that amongst the answers will be the existence of an effective Opposition. Without it, we have the sham of this place.

What a commentary that, over 20 years after these institutions came into place, we are now discussing a report to take some baby steps in respect of opposition. Such has been the vested interest of those clinging to office that they do not want to be scrutinised. They so want to cocoon themselves from scrutiny that, to this point, they have eschewed the very initial steps of having a proper Opposition, enjoying instead the luxury of knowing that they can never be voted out of office because of the absurdity of mandatory coalition. The House has long needed an effective Opposition. Of course, the purpose of an Opposition is, ultimately, to provide the electorate with an alternative, but this system fails and will continue to fail under mandatory coalition to do that.

I described this as a "baby steps" report, and so it is. That is most stark when you come to the financing of an Opposition. It is suggested that there should be an extra £100,000. How paltry. A few months ago, the House approved a translation service, needlessly and pointlessly, to translate that which is spoken into Irish and Ulster Scots and vice versa etc. That will cost the House £340,000 a year, and we think that £100,000 for an Opposition would be enough. The Audit Committee was told that the £340,000 a year would recruit six people. What will £100,000 recruit? Not even two full-time equivalents.

What is an Opposition's job? It is to mark a Government who have behind their backs the full panoply of a Civil Service of 20,000 people and more, who have spads who cost us almost £2 million a year, and the House thinks that giving an Opposition £100,000 a year to mark government and challenge all the resources that they have is adequate. It is a farce.

I have to say to the House, if you are going to do this job, do it right. Restricting an Opposition

and tying their hands by refusing to give them the resources is not the way to go. If we want an Opposition, they have to be a full-throated, effective Opposition, and that means that you have to enable them financially with the resources and research to mark the Government that they are opposing. Failure to do that is just to underscore the churlishness of the approach to having opposition in the House.

We are making some baby steps today, but, my oh my, we have some giant steps to make to bring the House to anything that equates to recognisable democracy where you can have a Government who are opposed with vigour and can be replaced because they fail, instead of the dysfunctionality that has hallmarked this place for the past two decades and more.

**Mr Weir:** Before I reflect on some of the contributions, I acknowledge the kind remarks of Members in a personal capacity. I also acknowledge, on behalf of the Committee, the diligence and rigour of Trevor Reaney in the work that he did in difficult circumstances.

Subject to the motion being agreed by the Assembly, the outcome of the review will be an enhancement of the entitlements of an official Opposition for the development of our model of government and delivery on the applicable NDNA recommendations.

I will turn briefly and thematically to the contributions. The Chair of the Committee on Procedures highlighted the Committee's reflection on what might not necessarily require direct changes and what would require changes to Standing Orders. There was also the safeguard in that that would require the approval of the House.

Colin McGrath highlighted, as did a number of Members, the fact that this was a step towards a greater level of maturity. It was acknowledged across the board that this is not a panacea for all issues. Whether people see it as a significant step or baby steps, most Members indicated that they welcomed it.

### 1.00 pm

Similarly, across the board, there has been a broad welcome for the report, although Members have, in different forms, included certain caveats, such as whether it goes far enough. Some Members were perhaps more enthusiastic about particular aspects than others.

A number of Members — Colin McGrath, Kellie Armstrong, Robbie Butler and, perhaps most pertinently, Jim Allister — highlighted the limitations of our current system and the need to at least move forward.

Kellie Armstrong and Andrew Muir highlighted the need for swift implementation of the report and said that this is not simply a challenge for the Assembly but that there needs to be a change of approach, which will be challenging for our Civil Service as well.

A number of Members highlighted the issue of balance, particularly in the context of enhancement. Gerry Kelly, going back to recommendation 1, talked about the need to ensure that opposition is neither incentivised nor disincentivised. We saw contrasting approaches to the issue of how we get the balance in resources. Gerry Kelly highlighted the need for affordability and said that that has to be taken into account when considering resources. Jim Allister made a different point about affordability and talked about the need to ensure that, financially, there is a high level of support so that we do not simply do this by half measures but ensure that it is done in a proper fashion. The detail of that will be taken forward.

Given time constraints, I have not been able to go into the contributions in more detail, but I welcome everybody's contribution. Today's debate has been useful in considering the important outworking of NDNA and, as a number of Members highlighted, the need for full implementation of what is there directly in legislation. If we take an optimistic approach, it at least marks another milestone in the development of the structures of the Assembly. On behalf of the Committee, I ask Members to support the motion.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes the report of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on the outcome of the independent review of the adequacy and effectiveness of the statement of entitlements for an official Opposition [NIA 137/17-22]; further notes that this addresses the applicable recommendation in paragraph 3.7 of annex C of 'New Decade, New Approach'; and calls on the Assembly to approve the Committee's recommendations contained in the report.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm

today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be questions to the Minister for the Economy.

*The sitting was suspended at 1.02 pm.*

2.00 pm

*On resuming (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stafford] in the Chair) —*

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Economy

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Questions 4 and 10 have been withdrawn.

### Skills Strategy

1. **Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how the skills strategy for Northern Ireland will address the barriers to employment and skills. (AQO 2694/17-22)

**Mr Lyons (The Minister for the Economy):** I thank the Member for her question and recognise and welcome the considerable number of questions that I received on the skills agenda. I also welcome the broad support for positive action on, and investment in, the issue, which is so central to our economic and social prosperity.

The recent consultation on 'Skills for a 10X Economy' highlighted issues faced by young people, women with caring responsibilities and people with disabilities in accessing skills provision on the same basis as the rest of our population. The skills strategy emphasises the need to work across government to build education and career pathways suitable and accessible to everyone.

Improving digital skills is a prime example of where officials are already engaging with the Department of Education and other key stakeholders. It is recognised that digital skills are essential, not just for economic development but for social inclusion and labour market participation.

Addressing barriers to skills and employment goes beyond the skills system itself. "Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning" is one of the strategy's main objectives. That will require collaboration across government to recognise and address the social issues that hinder access to education. In that regard, my skills strategy team has already initiated dialogue with the Department of Education and the Department for Communities, which are developing the Executive's childcare strategy and disability employment strategy respectively. I also agreed to establish a subcommittee of the

proposed skills council to look specifically at the barriers to inclusion in the labour market and to make recommendations on government policy and interventions.

I look forward to publishing the new skills strategy and beginning the process of implementing the broad range of commitments contained in it.

**Ms Brogan:** I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. He will be aware of a number of barriers that, in particular, women who are trying to get back into employment after having children face. One of those, as he mentioned, is access to affordable childcare. Is the Minister considering investing additional funding in the women returners programme in order to help mothers back into work and education?

**Mr Lyons:** As I said in my initial answer, childcare is an issue that primarily cuts across the Department of Education and the Department for Communities. We take an interest in it as well, however, because we recognise how important it is to allow those with caring responsibilities, who are not just but more often than not women, to get back into the workplace.

I am more than willing to work with Executive colleagues to ensure that we have sufficient childcare in place. It is one of the big issues that we face right now. We need not just to get people back into the workplace but to ensure that they have the proper skills and the training that is needed to acquire those skills. Where my Department can help, it stands ready to do so.

**Mr Dunne:** Skills are indeed a vital part of growing our economy. I ask the Minister how important the skills academies that his Department is rolling out are, particularly at addressing the short-term needs of the economy, given that many employers are struggling to find suitable employees. For example, I met the owner of a tile business in my constituency last week, and he highlighted to me the current lack of tilers.

**Mr Lyons:** All Members are aware of the skills shortage in the labour market and the difficulties that that is causing employers. There are longer-term issues that we need to address, and I hope to do so through the skills strategy. We also have an immediate problem, and the Assured Skills academies have done a fantastic job of making sure that, where there are gaps, we try to fill them. For Northern Ireland, one of the benefits of being small is that there is easy collaboration among industry, government and

the education institutions. We therefore need to maximise the potential that can come from that.

I am aware of the issue with tilers in particular. It was raised with me recently, during a constituency visit in East Belfast that I was involved in, so we recognise the problem there. My Department stands ready to help where it can. If the Member would like to contact us with further detail, we could look into the possibility of setting up an Assured Skills academy. Assured Skills academies operate not only in the trades that I have mentioned but in financial services, IT and other sectors. They are a key part of how we deal with the issues that we face. We also need to look to the long term, however, and that is why the skills strategy will be so important.

**Mr Dickson:** Minister, will you outline for the House how your skills strategy will address the lack of gender diversity in qualifications, particularly those aligned to STEM-focused jobs?

**Mr Lyons:** We absolutely want to make sure that opportunities are available for everyone, regardless of who they are, where they are from or, indeed, their gender. We need to look at not only the qualifications that we promote but also, and in particular, one of the strategy's key objectives, which is "Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning". Part of that, as I mentioned in my answer to question 1, is about dealing with the many barriers that exist. There are issues around childcare and finance, for example, but I do not want us to be in a position where we have a cohort of people who may well be able to get involved in different jobs and have different skills but who feel that they cannot do so because of their gender. My Department wants to rectify that so that the available opportunities are, in fact, available to everyone.

## High Street Scheme

2. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister for the Economy how many applicants to the high street scheme are awaiting identity verification. (AQO 2695/17-22)

11. **Ms Hunter** asked the Minister for the Economy for his assessment of the scale of fraudulent applications for the high street scheme. (AQO 2704/17-22)

15. **Ms Á Murphy** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how much money has been allocated to the high street scheme to date. (AQO 2708/17-22)

**Mr Lyons:** Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will group questions 2, 11 and 15 together, as they all relate to the high street scheme.

Some 1,436,000 applications have been made to the high street scheme. Nearly all the applicants who submitted evidence have had their applications processed. Approximately 50,000 applicants have yet to provide the necessary evidence and are still to be verified. All those people will have received either an email or a letter in the post asking them to provide further information

There is one instance of potential fraud involving an application to the high street scheme under investigation by the PSNI. The Department has provided supporting evidence in relation to that.

The scheme is ongoing, so it is not possible at this moment to give a definitive figure relating to overall costs. Members will be aware, however, that the Executive provided £145 million to fund the scheme. As I outlined to the Assembly last week, I have also set aside around £21 million of economic recovery action plan funding to cover potential cost overruns in the scheme. That is under constant review, and the latest projections indicate that around £5 million to £8 million of that contingency may be required. I have instructed my officials to continue to investigate other avenues in order to ensure that, in the event that the contingency is not required, the funding can be utilised elsewhere to aid economic recovery.

My message to everyone who receives a card is this: spend local. Please use your card to support your local businesses which have been most affected by the COVID-19 restrictions. I look forward to hearing from Members in the supplementary questions about where they have used their card.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I have four children and Christmas is coming, so that will give you a hint of where mine is going, Minister.

**Mr M Bradley:** I thank the Minister for his answer. He has also answered part of my supplementary question. For his information, I have not got a card yet, so I have not spent it anywhere.

Like many MLAs across all constituencies, I suppose, I have had numerous enquiries about verification. The Minister addressed that issue yesterday by sending out a communication to confirm that MLAs can now verify people's identity. That is very good, but what more can

be done to encourage people to spend their money in shops that were not open during the pandemic, so that the economic benefit goes to those who need it most?

**Mr Lyons:** I thank the Member, because it has come to my attention that he has been helping a family member of mine who lives in his constituency and who needed to provide additional information to be verified. I thank him for that, but I also want to highlight the important issue that he raised about how we can encourage people to spend their card locally. Ultimately, that power is in people's hands. We have used the scheme to try to help local businesses, but everyone who has received their card has a role to play in that. It is up to people to decide where they spend their card, but my message is to spend locally and, importantly, to make sure that anything that is left on the card is spent, otherwise that money will come back to the Department, and I want it to support local businesses instead.

The very strong message is to use the card in local businesses, even if there are only a few pounds left on it. In particular, as the Member rightly said, let us help those businesses that were affected most by the restrictions that were imposed on them, those that were not able to trade for a long time and those that were forced to shut, meaning that they lost business and had to deal with all the consequences that came from that. I hope that all Members will join in sending out that message. This is an opportunity; let us use it to support local businesses.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** This is the first occasion that I can call Mr Matthew O'Toole since he was appointed as Deputy Chair. I congratulate him on his appointment.

**Mr O'Toole:** Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I will try not to get dizzy with my ascent to rarefied heights.

Minister, you just talked about the importance of supporting local independent business with the card. I wholeheartedly agree with that, but I am sure you will agree that it is also important to assess the efficacy of policies. I understand from your Department that, using the authorisation codes, a dashboard is being collated of the spending of the Spend Local prepaid cards. I assume that will be able to tell us how much of the money has been spent in large multiples — Tesco, Asda and companies like that — and how much will be spent on what is known as Black Friday on 26 November. We will then be able to judge how well the scheme

has supported local independent businesses. Will you commit to publishing that data by authorisation code so that we can assess how effective the policy has been?

**Mr Lyons:** I absolutely want to be open and transparent about that. I want to make the data available so that we can see whether the scheme has fulfilled its policy objective, which I absolutely believe it has. It is still early days with the amount of money that is being spent, so we are seeing fluctuations in where it is going. However, the anecdotal evidence I have received so far has been deeply encouraging. I am hearing from local businesses in my constituency and others that it has given a terrific lift to independent retailers. I think the public see this as an opportunity to help businesses, and they want to help local businesses, in particular those that were closed. We are getting that evidence already. We will have more of that as it comes in. We will have those facts and figures, and I am more than happy for us to collate and share them. Right now, however, my focus is on making sure that the last people are verified and that those who are verified have the ability to get their card activated and spent. We all have a role to play in making sure that the money goes where it needs to go.

The other thing to realise is that we could have given the money directly to businesses, but we have an additional spend, because people are not just spending their £100; oftentimes, they give more money, and that is what we want to see. Beyond that, I hope we will see people going back to where they went before or that they see other things on offer on the high street, and I have already seen some anecdotal evidence of that happening. It is not just about where that is spent now, as important as that is; it is about the longer-term impact. I commend our businesses. They are doing a fantastic job to incentivise that spending, and they see it as an opportunity to bring people back to the high street.

**Mr Stewart:** Minister, you were kind enough, through your team, to share the MLA helpline email address with me last week. I did not bombard it, but I triaged the many issues that I got and sent some through. Unfortunately, the replies were generic copy-and-paste responses from the nidirect website and did not provide me or my constituents with the answers to some of their very difficult decisions and issues, whether that is a lost card or whatever. The manned helpline is simply not helping either. Is there anywhere else that we can go? Should those who have applied and not got a confirmation email, who have now been waiting

four or five weeks since the beginning and who still do not have their card, be concerned?

**Mr Lyons:** I acknowledge that our constituency offices will have received quite a volume of correspondence, as well as having people coming in looking for help with the cards.

Some of those issues relate directly to the Department. Others are directly for the card provider, depending on whether they are at the verification stage or whether there are issues with the card. I am sorry to hear that the Member continues to face issues, although they are very small, given the overall number of applications and everything else that has been processed. I encourage him to continue to use the email address that was sent to MLAs. If he finds that there are still difficulties, I would be more than happy to have a conversation with him to see what the potential problems might be and how we can fix them.

**2.15 pm**

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Minister, regarding some of the anti-fraud measures that are in place, a number of married women and transgender individuals are failing the name verification process. What measures has your Department put in place to rectify that?

**Mr Lyons:** I do not know whether the Member was in the Chamber last week when I, I hope, addressed that issue. I indicated that the Department is now showing maximum flexibility. If someone shows us a birth certificate and other information, even if those documents do not match up, we will do everything that we can to make sure that those applications are verified. I also announced yesterday that, if a constituent comes to the Member, and the Member is prepared to stand over the evidence or is convinced that that person is a legitimate applicant, approval from her will be enough; we trust her and other Members to provide that information.

I hope that I have demonstrated, the whole way through the process, that I have responded to issues as they have arisen and made sure that maximum flexibility is shown so that we can address all the issues. Some issues have arisen in a scheme in which over 1.4 million people are getting those cards, but we have demonstrated that we are responding quickly to them and doing everything that we can. I hope that that is an assurance to the Member today.

## Careers Guidance Service

3. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for the Economy what engagement his Department has had with the Department of Education regarding the creation of a new careers guidance service for school pupils. (AQO 2696/17-22)

**Mr Lyons:** I have concerns that careers guidance in schools is not ready to meet the challenges of the future economy. In the next few months, I will set out my vision to improve the wider careers and skills system, including clear short-term actions and longer-term direction to ensure that our careers systems and workforce skills align with our priority of a 10X Economy. I am pleased to announce that I will commission an independent review of the Department's careers guidance provision in schools, with a focus on the timing and mode of delivery. In addition, my Department will develop a careers and skills portal to enhance our digital offering.

The world of work is changing at a rapid pace. Our aim is to ensure that young people are aware of the opportunities that are available in emerging and growth sectors and are encouraged to attain the skills that are needed to fully engage with the workforce of the future. That is why it is so important that we engage with pupils at an early age — and families — and on an ongoing basis to ensure that our young people have the advice and skills to navigate the ever-changing world of work. My Department is working closely with the Department of Education on the joint transition of young people into careers 14-19 project. The project has considered careers as one of its key work streams. I expect that the outputs, which the Education Minister and I will consider shortly, will include a number of careers-related actions.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I welcome the Minister's innovation. Careers advice has long been a concern of mine. Will the careers advice service sit in your Department, as opposed to it being something of a postcode lottery across different schools and the energy and budget that they have to provide that advice?

**Mr Lyons:** I have said since coming into office that my objective is to build a healthy economy that delivers for everybody, no matter where you are, where you are from or who you are. That comes to careers as well; I want to make sure that everyone has access to up-to-date and relevant information. I want to include young people, families and parents in the decision-making process. I have been in this job for a few months. I see the incredible

opportunities that exist in Northern Ireland. When you see those opportunities, it is really easy to be hopeful for the future. We need to make sure that, as we build the 10X Economy, young people are aware of and see those fantastic opportunities, not just when they turn 16 or 17 but from an earlier age, so that we, and they, can prepare. That should not be on the basis of where you live; it should be the same across the board.

**Mrs Erskine:** I welcome what the Minister has just said on the collaborative approach with the Department of Education. Northern Ireland has exciting opportunities in our tech and creative industries, and it is really exciting to see those grow. Does the Minister agree that there is a perception that careers guidance is not adequately providing students, parents or those who are searching for jobs with real-world information on what skills or qualifications are needed for jobs now and will be needed in future job markets?

**Mr Lyons:** First of all, I welcome the Member to the House. I have not had the opportunity to do so in the Chamber, so I wish her well in her role. I also thank her for her question. She is absolutely right: we need to make sure that we have in place careers guidance and a careers system that are responsive to the world that we are living in today. I want young people and parents to have up-to-date information on where the opportunities are and how they can harness them to maximise the potential outcome. That is why I am commissioning the review. I want stakeholders to be involved. It is important that that is done quickly because I do not want us to miss out on the opportunities that are out there.

**Mr Sheehan:** One of the major difficulties in the careers system is that personalised advice is not available to students until year 12. Is there any plan in the careers strategy to make personalised advice available for students in year 10, before they pick their GCSE subjects?

**Mr Lyons:** The Member makes an important point about not just the personalised nature of careers advice but the age at which it is available. It is important that, as early as possible, we expose young people to the opportunities and routes that are open to them. I certainly have not put any barriers in the way of that happening or come down on one side or the other; it is worthy of consideration. If you look at what employers are doing and how they want to be involved, you will see that it is a good idea to make sure that they are exposed to it and that we see the interests of the young

people from as early an age as possible. That will all be part of the review.

**Mr Butler:** Has the Minister noted the Department of Education's 'A Fair Start' report on educational underachievement? In that report, the expert panel concluded that there is no:

*"parity of esteem (and understanding) between academic and vocational pathways and future job opportunities amongst pupils and parents and families."*

If he has, is he prepared to comment on that?

**Mr Lyons:** That is an issue that is raised time and time again. We, as a Department, will certainly look into it. It will be a key part of what we try to do on careers.

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

## Transition of Young People into Careers (14-19) Project

5. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the transition of young people into careers (14-19) project. (AQO 2698/17-22)

**Mr Lyons:** It is crucial that we prepare our young people to access high-quality jobs in delivering our vision of a 10X Economy. My Department has already made significant progress in that regard, including through the reform and simplification of the vocational pathways with Skills for Life and Work and traineeships; working with employers across a wide range of sectors to ensure that apprenticeship training reflects the changing needs of industry; and investment in the further education sector, which is critically placed to meet the needs of young people.

It is essential that we work collaboratively across our education and training landscape to ensure that our young people have the necessary knowledge and skills to succeed. That is why my Department jointly leads the transition of young people into careers (14-19) project alongside the Department of Education. On completion of the project's initial phase, which sought to establish the baseline position and identify the key challenges, the former Education and Economy Ministers agreed to the development of a strategic framework. That framework, which will set out the actions that are required to transform the 14-19 education and training landscape, will also play a

fundamental role in the delivery of my vision for a 10X Economy in delivering the policy objectives set out in the draft skills strategy and in fulfilling New Decade, New Approach commitments.

The project is currently finalising the strategic framework, and the Education Minister and I expect to consider that in the coming weeks. The actions in the framework, along with the other activities across Education and Economy, will help to ensure that young people have the appropriate skills that will help them to secure jobs in the future labour market.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I understand that the 14-19 strategy consultation started in 2018, and, recently, the Department for the Economy and the Department of Education cancelled briefings to the Committee for Education and the Committee for the Economy on the 14-19 strategy. That is despite the fact that one in five young people is misaligning their educational pathways and their career aspirations, and 84% of students are unaware of the Department for the Economy's Careers Service. What is complicating the pathway to the delivery of such an important strategy?

**Mr Lyons:** I agree that it is an important strategy. Therefore, it is important that we get it right. As I mentioned, the project is finalising the strategic framework, and the draft documents are being considered by senior officials in the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy, prior to being submitted to the Education Minister and me for deliberation. I think that it is more appropriate to provide both Committees with a more comprehensive briefing on the strategic framework once the Education Minister and I have had the opportunity to agree it.

**Mr O'Dowd:** In my time in the Department of Education, I tried to unearth the 14-19 strategy. It is elusive, and it is difficult to tie down. As you said, there are documents in place, and they will come before the Ministers before the end of this mandate and will go out and become policy, but that policy has to include support for young people, particularly those young people who benefit from organisations such as Include Youth, which supports young people who have left school and require further education and training. Will a future 14-19 strategy continue to include support from the community and voluntary sector?

**Mr Lyons:** The Member has rightly stated the importance of the community and voluntary

sector to this particular piece of work. Although the strategy is still being finalised, we all recognise the important role that it has to play.

**Mr O'Toole:** The 14-19 strategy is critical. One of the things that I do not think that it will look at, nor is it mentioned in the 10X strategy, is the crisis that is particular to this place, which is around educational and economic migration among young people. It is sometimes called the "brain drain". It is a crisis that is particular to here. Minister, will you and your Department do something that you have not done up to now, which is to take a proper look at developing a strategy aimed at tackling our very high levels of educational and economic migration among young people? Far too many young people leave this place to go to university or simply for work, and they never think of coming back.

**Mr Lyons:** I encourage the Member to take a look at the skills strategy consultation document that we have produced, because it accurately reflects where the needs are in the economy, where there is a shortfall, the levels at which there is a shortfall and where there is an oversupply. In fact, with regard to young people going across the water to attend university, what he will find is that a lot of them are determined leavers. They are people who, regardless of the places available here, have decided to go elsewhere, and it is very difficult, if somebody wants to go away, for them not to. However, I want to make sure that people have opportunity here, at whatever level. I want to encourage people to look not just at higher education as a pathway but at further education, because there are some fantastic opportunities in our colleges here as well. I want to keep people in Northern Ireland, and I want people to come back to Northern Ireland.

2.30 pm

## **Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill: Update**

6. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill (NIA Bill 22/17-22). (AQO 2699/17-22)

**Mr Lyons:** As the Member will be aware, the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill passed its Second Stage on 14 June. Since that date, it has been with the Economy Committee, of which he is a member, for scrutiny. During that time, the Committee has received a volume of written evidence and numerous responses to its queries relating to

the Bill. The Committee has also been briefed by departmental officials on a number of occasions throughout the year and three times in the past month.

I have personally corresponded with the Committee to reiterate the importance of the Bill, and I have highlighted the potential risk to the roll-out of its measures should there be any deviation from its provisions. The Speaker's recent announcement that Bills are progressing through the Assembly that will run out of time and fail to become law has worried me, but what has worried me further is the fact that, despite the risk identified by the Speaker, the Bill has been potentially jeopardised by further amendments that could seriously hinder if not block its passage in this mandate.

Should the Bill fall as a result of amendments pushing it to the point of running out of time, let us be clear about what that would mean. It means that there will be a denial of the same rights, entitlements and support to working parents in Northern Ireland following a child bereavement as those that are given to working parents in the rest of the UK.

As the Member will be aware, departmental officials have advised the Committee of the inherent risks associated with bringing forward amendments that seek to remove the 26-week qualifying period or to integrate miscarriage provisions into a parental bereavement Bill. The Bill is the result of painstaking work carried out over a number of years by departmental officials. It has involved a wide-ranging consultation with members of the public, and substantial in-depth legal advice has been sought from the Office of Legislative Counsel and the Departmental Solicitor's Office. That is how legislation should be developed, with due care and the close involvement of a significant number of stakeholders.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** This is unfortunate. That was a very important question and a very important answer. If Members had taken a bit less time in asking questions earlier, Mr Nesbitt would have been in a position to ask a supplementary on that question.

We now move on to topical questions.

### **Almac: Job Creation**

T1. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for the Economy to join him in welcoming the creation of 1,000 new, high-value jobs at global company Almac and to state whether he agrees that that is a positive example of the

competitive advantage that is afforded to companies based in Northern Ireland owing to the linkages to the GB and EU markets through the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. (AQT 1761/17-22)

**Mr Lyons:** The Member will not be surprised to hear that I completely agree with him, in that I welcome the jobs that have come to Northern Ireland. There is no surprise that I am delighted that there has been further investment by that company in Northern Ireland. I am delighted about the jobs that will be created and the opportunities that they will present for people not only in the area but further afield in Northern Ireland.

Again and again, I hear that the best thing that we have to offer is the skills and talent of our young people. Companies have told me that that is why they are reinvesting.

The Member mentions the access that we have to the UK and the EU. The access is, of course, only partial. The big problem that we face is the difficulty in getting goods from GB into Northern Ireland, the additional bureaucracy and the effect that that is having on businesses. That is the problem that we face. It is a real problem and a challenge. I see members of the Alliance Party shaking their heads. It is a challenge that businesses face, yet that party continues to fail to acknowledge that there is an issue with it.

My focus and the focus of my party on these Benches is to ensure that we deal with those difficulties. That is where my focus is, and I hope that that is also where the focus of others is.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Minister for his response. Further to the significant job announcement, what additional work has the Economy Minister undertaken with Invest NI to promote Northern Ireland as an investment location?

**Mr Lyons:** I work very closely with Invest NI to promote Northern Ireland. I am delighted that we have had success in recent months. I am pleased that we have new investors for the first time. I am pleased that investors who had previously invested are coming back. In fact, one such company recently told me that one of the reasons why it came back was our Assured Skills academies and the fact that business, government and higher and further education institutions work collaboratively to provide support. That collaboration happens on a number of levels. I will always stand ready to promote Northern Ireland and our people across the world.

## UK/EU Markets: Dual Access

T2. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he believes that dual access to the UK and EU markets is an advantage or a disadvantage. (AQT 1762/17-22)

**Mr Lyons:** It is not an advantage when the consequence is that we are cut off from our biggest market, which is the rest of the UK. Trade barriers have been put in place, and there are additional difficulties. The Members on that side of the House will not acknowledge that it is an issue. They are shaking their heads. They are not listening to businesses. They do not understand the concerns that are being expressed. This is not coming from me; businesses are telling me about the additional bureaucracy, the additional cost and the additional hours that have to be spent filling out paperwork and dealing with all of those issues. If those Members would at least acknowledge that, it would go some way towards helping us. However, even today, you can see that, when I say that some businesses are having problems bringing goods from Great Britain into Northern Ireland, they refuse to even acknowledge that there is a problem. If you fail to acknowledge that there is a problem, you will never come up with a solution.

**Ms S Bradley:** History will show disappointment that we had an Economy Minister who did not see access to both markets as an advantage.

Invest NI is entrusted with seeking foreign direct investment. One would anticipate that its messaging should be a fanfare to the world that this place has access to both markets. The headline position on Invest NI's website is:

*"Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom. It's an ideal location for international firms looking to set up a new operation."*

There is no mention of our enviable economic position. Neither is there any reference —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I am loath to interrupt. Questions need to be more focused. I regret that I had to interrupt the Member, but will she please come to the question?

**Ms S Bradley:** I appreciate your intervention, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I hope that when you hear the question, you will understand why I needed to contextualise it. There is no mention of that, but Invest NI goes on to boast that salary costs are around 30%

lower. Will the Minister advise whether he or his predecessors had any part to play in Invest NI's being mute on our economic advantage and its lack of ambition to reach out to secure well-paid jobs for this place on that basis?

**Mr Lyons:** It is absolutely ridiculous that the Member will not even acknowledge the problems that exist with the Northern Ireland protocol. Some have continued to refuse to acknowledge the fact that there are problems and issues. Their heads are stuck in the sand. I am trying to sort that out. As a party, we are trying to make sure that those issues are dealt with. It is disappointing that the Member's party cannot even acknowledge that there are issues.

I am more than happy to stand over my record and, indeed, the record of my predecessors on attracting jobs and investment to Northern Ireland, to highlight the positive things that we have to sell, to talk about our young people, to talk about the opportunities and, indeed, to bring high-quality, well-paid jobs to Northern Ireland. I am more than happy to stand over that record. I am concerned about the trade frictions that we are experiencing right now. I am concerned about the impact that those are having on business. Obviously, the Member does not recognise what is happening. I do, and I will do something about it.

**Ms S Bradley:** On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Points of order are not taken during Question Time. At the conclusion of Question Time, I will be happy to take your point of order.

Question 3, in the name of Mr William Irwin, has been withdrawn.

## Onshore Petroleum Exploration

T4. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of his Department commissioning independent research into the economic, environmental and social impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and production in Northern Ireland, when he intends to publish the final research report from Hatch Regeneris, which was published in July 2021. (AQT 1764/17-22)

**Mr Lyons:** The Member will be aware that the Department is undertaking reviews of mineral and petroleum licensing regimes to ensure that they are fit for purpose. As the Member correctly outlined, the Department commissioned two pieces of research into the

economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and extraction, as well as mineral exploration and mining, in Northern Ireland. The research on the impacts of the licensing has been completed. It will inform the Executive's consideration of evidence-based policy options. I hope to be in a position to bring those options to my Executive colleagues later in the year. The preferred option will then be subject to public consultation. The research on the impacts of mineral exploration is at an earlier stage, however, and will inform the Department's initial consideration of the scope of the issues to be considered.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Minister for his answer. He touched on the policy options. In a letter to me earlier this year, he stated that he would bring policy options to the Executive for final approval prior to public consultation. He referenced that in his answer. Does he have a date?

**Mr Lyons:** I do not have a date. That will go to the Executive first in order for us to get Executive agreement.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Question 5 has been withdrawn.

### **Industrial Sites: Mid Ulster**

T6. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister for the Economy to advise whether Invest NI plans to buy any land for industrial sites in Mid Ulster, which, although it has the highest number of VAT-rated businesses outside Belfast city centre, has the worst infrastructure and the least amount of land for business development. (AQT 1766/17-22)

**Mr Lyons:** I do not have that particular information on the Member's constituency. I am, however, more than happy to speak with officials in the Department to see whether I can find the information and make sure that it is given to her. I hope that she will appreciate that it is a niche issue. It is not something for which I have the details in front of me. I have said before, though, that I want to make sure that we help businesses grow, help more businesses start and help more investors come in, regardless of the constituency. I will do anything that I can do to help in Mid Ulster, or any constituency.

**Ms Dillon:** I thank the Minister for his answer. It may seem like a niche issue, but Mid Ulster produces 85% of the world's crushing and

screening equipment. There is nothing niche about it. There is a lack of skills in Mid Ulster. Will the Minister commit at least to looking at the potential for a skills academy in the area?

**Mr Lyons:** I was talking about the figures. I was not in any way talking about the industry, because I know the importance of Mid Ulster to manufacturing in particular. I am more than happy to look at any proposals that come forward for a shared skills academy. As, I think, I said earlier, I was in Ballymena this morning, looking at a welding academy that will be open for applications from next week. Such facilities are fantastic collaborations among business, industry, government and further and higher education. If there is a need to address a specific problem right now, we will be more than happy to look at it and see whether, and how, we can help.

### **Downpatrick: Investment**

T7. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister for the Economy, after reminding him that the SDLP has never denied that there are problems as a result of Brexit, which is why it did not support it, and stating that it is a pity that other Members of House did not join it in that opposition, which would have meant avoiding the debacle that we face, to state, in his time as Minister, the specific direct investment and work that he has authorised for the town of Downpatrick, given that he will agree that Downpatrick is a wonderful town with much to offer. (AQT 1767/17-22)

**Mr Lyons:** If the Member was opposed to the protocol, or did not like it, why did he call for its rigorous implementation? That is a question to which we still have not had an answer. I hope that that is a change of tone now from the SDLP, that it recognises the problems that exist with the protocol and that it is prepared to work with those who want to see those problems addressed, particularly the concerns about the UK's internal market.

### **2.45 pm**

I am sure that Downpatrick is a fantastic town that has lots of potential and that it is benefiting from the work of my Department, whether that is in higher and further education, skills or telecoms. I hope that properties in the Member's constituency will benefit from Project Stratum, which is the result of £150 million that was made available by the DUP/Conservative confidence-and-supply agreement. I am not sure whether Invest NI has directly given particular support; however, Tourism NI has

invested a lot in that area. Last week, I was at the World Travel Market in London, and folks from the local council told me all that there was to see and do in that area, supported by Tourism NI. I am sure that my Department is helping people in Downpatrick and the whole of South Down as we seek to build a healthy economy that delivers opportunity for everybody.

**Mr McGrath:** I think that you will find that it was Brexit to which we were opposed and that there would not have been any problems if that had not progressed.

On the issue of Downpatrick, I heard a lot of "I am sure", "I hope" and "might be". We need an Economy Minister who will stand up for the people of Downpatrick. If I ask that question again in the future, will you give me a definitive list of what you are doing, so that I can go back to the people of Downpatrick and say that the Department is doing all that it can for them?

**Mr Lyons:** Unfortunately, I have not yet received an invitation from Mr McGrath to visit Downpatrick. I was in South Down yesterday. I was very pleased to be in South Down; I was invited to Kilkeel to see the fantastic work being done at Collins Aerospace and the fantastic opportunities there. I am very grateful to that company for inviting me. Perhaps the Member would like to take the opportunity to invite me to his constituency; I would be more than willing to listen to people's concerns. I thank all the Members who have invited me to their constituencies — I see Mr Newton, Mr Buckley, Mr Bradley and others across the Chamber — and, if anybody else wants to invite me, I will be more than willing to visit and to tell the Member about all the things that are happening in Downpatrick.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Mercifully, that concludes questions to the Economy Minister.

**Ms S Bradley:** On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I accept your ruling that this place has set a shorter parameter than other places in relation to contextualising questions, but, although it may take me a while to get to my question, is there any ruling when a Minister never gets to the answer? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** For the benefit of all Members, not simply the Member who raised the point of order, it is important that I refer Members to Standing Order 19, which relates to questions:

*"A member may ask questions of –*

*(a) a Minister, on matters relating to the Minister's official responsibilities;*

*(b) a member representing the Assembly Commission, on matters relating to the Commission's official responsibilities.*

*(2) A question should not contain –*

*(a) statements of facts or names of persons, unless they are necessary to make the question intelligible and can be authenticated;*

*(b) arguments, inferences or imputations;*

*(c) adjectives, unless they are necessary to make the question intelligible;*

*(d) ironical expressions;*

*(e) hypothetical matter; or*

*(f) requests for expressions of opinion, legal or otherwise."*

Mr Nesbitt asked a very important question and was not able to get a supplementary question. I suspect that, if Members had tried to abide by the Standing Orders, he most definitely would have. Can we try to keep questions focused in future, Members? Not doing so deprives other Members of the chance to ask their questions.

If Members can take their ease —

**Ms S Bradley:** Further to that point of order —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** A further point of order?

**Ms S Bradley:** Yes, please.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Tear away.

**Ms S Bradley:** I appreciate your comments, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, but I made the point about the answer, as opposed to the question, and I ask the Principal Deputy Speaker to give that some consideration.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** It is established that a Minister can take up to two minutes to answer a question and three if he or she gives advance notice of the intention to take three minutes. It is not for me to pass comment on the content of an answer. The Member may not have liked the content of the Minister's answer,

but the Minister's answer was the Minister's answer.

I ask Members to take their ease before we move on to the next item of business.

## Question for Urgent Oral Answer

### Infrastructure

#### Withdrawal of Bus Services in Belfast

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Mr Roy Beggs has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister for Infrastructure, Mrs Nichola Mallon. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary.

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the decision to withdraw bus services from some parts of Belfast.

**Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):** I thank the Member for raising the issue. As Members will be aware, Translink took the decision to temporarily remove services from some parts of Belfast following the recent attacks that we have seen on our buses. It is disgraceful and disgusting that our public transport workers and members of the public going about their daily business have been targeted for attack. I am sure that I speak for all Members when I say that our thoughts are very much with the bus drivers and passengers at the heart of this.

The safety of the public and our public transport workers is vital. They deserve to feel safe doing their job. I assure Members that Translink has not taken the decision lightly. However, it was deemed necessary, as the organisation has a duty of care to its staff and to ensuring their safety. Translink has advised me that it will review the arrangements on a daily basis. Translink and my officials are engaged with the PSNI and the Department of Justice respectively.

I am thankful that no one has been hurt in the attacks. However, that does not detract from the danger faced by our bus drivers and passengers. Regardless of the issues in communities, attacking our public transport network is not the answer, and it is only damaging services to the people who live in our communities.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Minister for her response. Indeed, the disruption goes way beyond Belfast, with diversions happening

elsewhere. It has even affected bus routes in Monkstown and Whiteabbey, which are in my constituency. Drivers and passengers have been traumatised, double-decker buses to the value of £200,000 each have been destroyed and the travelling public have had their lives disrupted. Is the Minister able to advise when normal bus services will return, with drivers being respected by all for the essential service that they provide to the local communities that they serve?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. He is absolutely right: our buses provide a critical service to communities. They ensure that, as we heard from passengers, people are able to get to and from their place of work, young people are able to get to and from school and people can get to important hospital appointments. I think very much of our elderly citizens who use our public transport network to enable them to do their daily shopping. All that has been disrupted as a result of those wanton acts of destruction.

I am clear: I want our public transport network to grow. It is deeply regrettable that the decision had to be taken, on the basis of risk, to restrict a number of routes. I assure Mr Beggs and all Members that we will continually assess the situation and work to reinstate those vital services as soon as possible so that they can continue to be provided to the communities affected.

**Mr Boylan:** I welcome the Minister here to answer on behalf of the drivers and the people who use the buses. The attacks on the buses and the ordeal that drivers have had to suffer and endure are absolutely unacceptable and must be condemned by all. Sinn Féin stands in solidarity with the workers who provide a key public service every day and who want to continue to do so without fear for their safety. Will the Minister further detail what measures are being taken to increase security and support for the drivers and what conversations she has had to date?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member very much for his words of condemnation, which are shared throughout the House and across the North. Translink has a welfare team, which is engaging directly to assist and support the drivers who have been affected. I have also offered my support, and I am happy to convey that sentiment from the House to the drivers who have been affected.

In addition to that, working with the PSNI, Translink has introduced a number of

measures. Translink operational managers have been established in the PSNI's silver command, so that we can facilitate an agile response to any arising situation. Daily sitrep meetings are taking place between senior Translink and PSNI personnel. The PSNI is also supporting Translink services through the deployment of additional resources via the silver command structure. Additional Translink mobile support vehicles will be deployed in greater Belfast to support drivers where required.

Of course, as is under discussion today, temporary curtailment of and alteration to bus services has had to be introduced; however, that is being kept under daily review. Furthermore, it is critical that regular update meetings are being held between Translink and our trade unions.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Minister for coming to the House and for her answers thus far. I want to put on record my condemnation of the attacks on Translink property and the buses in particular. Those drivers carry out a vital function for the public, and our thoughts are with all Translink staff. In light of the recent attacks, will the Minister update the House on the police assessment of the current threat level towards Translink staff and drivers on bus services and on progress towards the normalisation of services?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his words of condemnation. He is absolutely right. Our bus drivers choose to be bus drivers. They have chosen a career in which they are serving the local communities in which they live, and they absolutely should be able to go about their job feeling safe. They deserve our respect and gratitude. No one — not a single bus driver or train driver — should be subject to threats of violence or acts of violence.

I want to assure the Member that the decision to suspend the routes was based on PSNI advice. Translink will continue to work with the PSNI to get ongoing assessments so that we can make informed decisions on the risk assessment around any decisions to continue to suspend routes. Furthermore, I want to assure the Member and the House that our bus drivers want to get back to serving their communities, but they want to feel safe. Translink is working with our trade unions and the PSNI, and I am very clear that my officials are there to support them so that we can get our services safely and promptly resumed.

**Ms Hunter:** These attacks on our public transport are an absolute disgrace and serve absolutely no one. In my constituency in recent months, a car was set on fire on the train tracks in the Bellarena area. That caused significant distress to all on board the train, including the driver, and to the local community. These acts serve absolutely nobody.

Our transport staff are hard-working people who ensure that our constituents are transported from A to B. They deserve respect and, of course, safety. On that note, will the Minister update us on how transport workers are being supported after this unnerving experience, and will social media be updated by Translink to advise users when services are back up and running?

**Ms Mallon:** The Member is absolutely right when she points to the fact that this is the fourth attack this year on our public transport workers. There was the hijacking of a bus in Lanark Way and a car was burned on a railway line in East Derry, as the Member mentioned. There was a bus hijacking in Ards and another one in Rathcoole.

I am sure that I speak for the House when I say that every attack on our public transport workers is an attack on the people of Northern Ireland.

### 3.00 pm

Translink will continue to work to support the drivers who have been at the heart of the attacks. It has a welfare team that is working to support the drivers, who have been through a horrific ordeal. I understand that the impact — the psychological impact — of such incidents often only comes to the fore after the event, so it is important that ongoing support is provided to the drivers who have been impacted.

I assure the Member that Translink will use media outlets and social media, as I will, to promote any changes to our routes to ensure that our passengers are kept as informed as possible. We can see the outworkings of this. It has brought home to me how many members of our community rely on public transport to go about their everyday lives.

**Mr Muir:** Images of buses being hijacked and burned evoke memories of a plaque in Laganside bus centre that records the names of all the bus drivers who were killed during the Troubles. Only by the grace of God has someone not been killed or seriously injured in the recent incidents.

Does the Minister agree that the only thing that needs to come from the House is complete solidarity with our bus drivers and zero tolerance of criminality? Does she also agree that what we need right now is political leadership, with the word "but" removed from our dictionary, complete condemnation of what has been happening and a toning down of the rhetoric outside the Chamber?

**Ms Mallon:** I very much agree with Mr Muir's comments. There should be universal condemnation of the attacks. There should be universal solidarity with our public transport workers and passengers who were subjected to a horrific ordeal. There should be universality in standing up to those who threaten violence and carry out acts of violence in our society. The fundamental requisite for that is political leadership; courageous political leadership that gives citizens hope, rather than fuelling fears. I very much hope that, across the House, there will be condemnation — that has been evidenced — solidarity and, of course, political leadership.

**Mr G Kelly:** I apologise for not getting to the Chamber for the first part of the question for urgent oral answer. Forgive me if I ask something that you have dealt with. I think that you have dealt with some of it before.

First, there is solidarity with the bus drivers and unequivocal condemnation across the House. The Minister mentioned the bus drivers. It has been said many times that they are the people who brought front-line workers —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Mr Kelly, I am sorry to interrupt you. Could you move a little closer to the microphone? Other Members are saying that they cannot hear you.

**Mr G Kelly:** It is interesting that somebody wants to hear me. *[Laughter.]* A number of people have said that bus drivers have transported our front-line workers during the pandemic. Actually, they are themselves front-line workers, and the attacks have shown that. The Minister also mentioned the passengers. What help are the passengers who were involved in these terrible incidents getting? There have been four incidents.

I agree that the rhetoric needs to be brought down. People, whether they are misinterpreting the rhetoric or whatever, use it to carry out these acts.

This is my last question. I think that you also said that the PSNI is working with Translink on

the routes that will be affected. I assume that, being a representative of the same area as me, you have also received calls about why some of the routes are being closed down. I have had a lot of calls about the Antrim Road in particular.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Could we —

**Mr G Kelly:** Could the Minister say something about that?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, Minister.

**Ms Mallon:** I absolutely agree that bus drivers are front-line workers. They have also clearly demonstrated, if it needed to be demonstrated, that they are key workers. They have kept this place going throughout the pandemic, and I again pay tribute to them for that.

Many of the affected bus drivers and passengers will still be in a state of shock. It is important that counselling and support services are provided to the drivers and passengers who have been caught up in this and that they can access those in a timely manner that suits their needs.

In relation to the routes, the action taken was based on advice from the PSNI in discussion with local community representatives and the trade unions. Those discussions informed the risk assessment on which the decision to withdraw services was based. There will continue to be close engagement between Translink and the PSNI. As the Minister responsible for public transport, I know that Translink and our bus drivers want to see all services resumed at the earliest opportunity. Of course, to do that, we need to ensure that our bus drivers and passengers are safe.

**Ms Bunting:** My very best to the bus drivers and passengers affected.

I was at a meeting, last night, with constituents in East Belfast who feel that they are being penalised unfairly and without basis because of bad behaviour in Newtownards. What is the Minister's explanation for those people? Can she square that circle? Was and is there any intelligence to suggest that that bad behaviour would be replicated in East Belfast? Many people, at this point, have been inconvenienced.

**Ms Mallon:** Let us be clear: routes are being impacted because masked men, who are cowards and criminals, hijacked two buses in a matter of days, putting the lives of bus drivers

and passengers at risk, so the blame for this lies squarely with them.

The operational decision was based on a risk assessment informed by advice from the PSNI and then by working with trade unions and community representatives. I reassure any member of our community in Northern Ireland that there is absolutely no intention to penalise wider communities. The sporadic nature of the incidents and the fact that there have been four attacks in the past year have necessitated, regrettably, the actions that we had to introduce last night. We want to see leadership at a community level and at a political level, so that we can get to a point where no more attacks of this nature occur and where drivers not only feel safe but are safe in carrying out their daily job.

I reiterate that I want to see the expansion of our public transport network. I am angry that we have had to suspend services, depriving communities of a critical public service. We will all work together to ensure that we reinstate those services and end that disruption as soon as possible.

**Mr O'Toole:** Minister, first, I stand in solidarity with the trade unions and the bus drivers who have been put through unacceptable risks and experiences over the past week and in the past two months. Do you agree that we cannot pretend that this has not happened in the context of increasingly inflammatory rhetoric, whether in Belfast or, particularly, in London? Do you also agree that those who claim to speak on behalf of those communities are doing nothing other than committing a nihilistic crime against working-class people and communities? They are not defending them or their interests or identities. They are committing nihilistic crimes that make the lives of working-class people more difficult. They should stop now, and everybody in the Chamber and outside it should reflect that in their language.

**Ms Mallon:** I absolutely concur that the acts of violence and threat need to stop now. My concern is that we see an escalation. With reference to rhetoric, we know to our detriment in this place that words can act as weapons. There is an onus on all of us to be responsible in our use of language and, at times of tension, to step up, pull people away from the brink and send unequivocal messages that there can never be any justification for violence or the threat of violence.

As demonstrated by the comments made across the House, the people who have been harmed are, of course, the bus drivers at the

heart of this and the passengers, but also harmed are the wider communities that the bus routes serve. It was an act of self-harm. It was an attack on the people of Rathcoole. It was an attack on the people of Ards. It is the local community that is suffering as a result of this action. It serves no purpose, and those behind it need to get off the backs of the local communities.

**Dr Aiken:** We in the Ulster Unionist Party stand in condemnation of both incidents. I declare an interest as a member of Unite. Minister, we stand in full solidarity with the workers of Translink and with the community of Rathcoole. We have heard a lot about reassuring the people from Translink, but many members of the community in Rathcoole feel as though they have been marginalised. They would like somebody to reach out to them now and say that public services can be restored to them as quickly as possible. Will you, as Minister, bearing in mind that Rathcoole is part of your constituency, reach out to that community now and say that we will restore these services as quickly as we can? Those people feel that they are being unfairly demonised, as we already heard from Members from east Belfast and Newtownards.

**Ms Mallon:** I give those assurances. That is why I am so angry about the situation. It is an attack on our front-line public servants and on the communities that those buses service and support. I have been very clear. None of us wants to be in a situation where we suspend bus services, and I want to make sure that those services are resumed at the earliest opportunity. I have a duty to people who live right across Northern Ireland who rely on and access our public transport. I also have a duty of care to our bus drivers and their passengers. I sincerely hope that we see a swift end to these threats and escalating acts of violence. Then we can provide public transport across Northern Ireland. Let me re-emphasise that, at the earliest opportunity and as soon as it is safe to do so, we will restore services.

**Ms Armstrong:** Minister, as a former manager of community transport, I understand the responsibility that drivers have to provide safe passage for people across Northern Ireland. I absolutely give my support to all fellow drivers — I still consider myself as one — Chris Conway and the whole of Translink. Minister, do you agree that, irrespective of the sniggers that have happened across the House — I have to say that I am quite disappointed by the backbenchers of the DUP who are sniggering

during a debate about two buses being burnt out, two drivers being attacked —

**Mr Buckley:** Catch yourself on.

**Ms Armstrong:** Really? I need to catch myself on now?

**Mr Buckley:** Yes.

**Ms Armstrong:** I am a member of the community that had a bus burnt out in my area, and people other than the MLAs who represent that community seem to think that they can speak on its behalf. Minister, do you agree that the thugs, the gunmen, the people who wielded knives and the people who had petrol to pour over the buses are those who take full blame for this? If members of the community want to get their buses back as quickly as possible, they should bring information to the police to make sure that these thugs and criminals are caught. As MLAs, we are supposed to say that these actions are wrong rather than sitting here giggling.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** There are two points. This is obviously a very sensitive issue. Members should direct comments through the Chair at all times, and then we can avoid situations where what just happened, happened. I do not think that it is appropriate to shout, "Catch yourself on" across the Chamber at someone, but I do not think that it is appropriate to point and gesticulate. This is a very sensitive issue. If we can keep a lid on our inflamed passions, it would be useful, especially given that the public are looking in on the debate.

**Ms Mallon:** I agree that those who attacked the buses have done nothing more than harm their own community. They have deprived the communities and people of Rathcoole and Ards of using public transport to go to and from their places of work. There is no justification for that. There is nothing to be gained from it. I urge those behind these attacks, if they are listening, to get off the backs of the local communities, stop attacking them and try contributing something positive to the community and to society. This is a very emotive issue, because I firmly believe that an attack on our public transport network is an attack on us all. It is very important that, across the House, we stand firm with the bus drivers, the trade unions and the communities affected. We must stand firm against anyone who thinks that they can advance their goals through violence or by threatening and intimidating our public workers or our communities.

**3.15 pm**

**Mr Humphrey:** The Minister is right to say that the use of language in Northern Ireland is particularly important. That applies to the use of language all year round, particularly in the month of July and particularly in my constituency. It was not always the case from public representatives.

After the bus was attacked in the Shankill area, friends of mine took the driver to the depot. He was hugely distressed and very shaken. Today, constituents of mine in Rathcoole and people right across the city are being negatively affected by those people and their actions. It is wrong, and it has to be condemned. Local people are being inconvenienced and annoyed, and their lives are being disrupted by all of this. Pensioners and working people alike are affected.

I accept that a risk assessment has taken place. Through working with the police and Translink, will there be effective communication to the communities that are being hit hardest by this? We have now had a second day of it: how long will it continue?

**Ms Mallon:** As I stated, all efforts are being made to resume full service as quickly as possible. We have a duty of care to our bus drivers and passengers, however. Translink will continue to work closely with the PSNI and the trade unions to ensure that we resume services as soon as it is safe to do so.

On the media this morning, Chris Conway set out that communication will be via a number of mediums, including mainstream media and social media. I also ask Members across the House, as that information is made public, to do what they can to communicate it through the various channels that they have at their disposal. In particular, I ask representatives whose constituencies are affected to do that, because they are well placed to communicate the information to their constituents.

**Mr Newton:** I join other Members in sending good wishes to the Translink staff who have been directly affected. No one should have to suffer such circumstances when doing their daily duty and, indeed, serving the public. I also join others in calling anyone who has even a small piece of information that might be helpful to give it to the PSNI. That can help the police as they go about their duties in trying to make those who carried out the attacks amenable to the law.

The Member for North Belfast talked about the distressing experience of one of the bus drivers affected. There will probably be a longer-term impact on his mental health. The outworking of the situation is that members of the public — pensioners and people going about their daily duties — are the ones who are most inconvenienced.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member get to his question?

**Mr Newton:** I have a practical question for the Minister. What is the cost to the public purse of the two buses having been burnt and the two replacement buses that will need to be purchased?

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question. I absolutely agree with him, and Ms Armstrong made the same point: it is imperative that anyone who has any information, no matter how insignificant they may think it, passes it to the PSNI so that those behind the attacks can be brought to justice.

We have talked about the cost of the attacks in terms of their impact on the community and on people who are trying to get to and from work. The cost of each double-decker bus destroyed in the attacks is in excess of £200,000, and there is an additional cost for their replacement. More importantly, the attacks are highly dangerous. Although no one has been injured yet, no cost can be put on the safety of our staff and passengers.

**Mr Chambers:** I echo the words of my colleague Dr Aiken. My party wishes to be fully associated with the outright condemnation of these senseless attacks. Aside from the cancelled services, several diversions to bus routes are in place. Some bus stops may not have service, but the bus may still pass nearby. Although we hope that normal bus services can return as soon as possible, there is a need to inform the travelling public fully of local changes to normal routes, which I appreciate have been forced on Translink. Listening to the radio yesterday, I thought that the information being given about diversions was not as clear as it could have been. In fact, it was a bit confusing. Will the Minister contact Translink to encourage it to try to inform people of the nearest continuing public transport services in order to assist the travelling public?

Before taking my seat, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will say that there is a responsibility right around the Chamber for us, as Members, to consider our words and measure our tone.

**Ms Mallon:** I thank the Member for his question and reassure him that my officials are in very regular contact with Translink on the matter.

The Member asked about communication. Yesterday was a fast-moving situation, in which there had to be multiple engagements with the trade union and the PSNI. The information about routes that would be impacted on came out at around 4.00 pm. Translink will, of course, continue to work hard to ensure that we communicate any changes to routes to the public as early and as clearly as possible. My sincere hope is that the next communication will confirm the reinstatement of services so that we can provide that critical community service in the affected areas.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** No other Members have indicated that they wish to ask the Minister a question. I therefore ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

## Assembly Business

**Mr Buckley:** On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. During questions, the Member for Strangford Ms Armstrong, made accusations towards me and other Members on the DUP Benches about sniggering during the debate, which was on a very serious topic. I note to you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, that every single Member who asked a question during Question Time outrightly condemned the attacks on bus drivers in Belfast and Newtownards. It is a slight on me and on other Members to suggest or imply otherwise.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Strictly speaking, that is not a point of order, but the Member has certainly placed his comments on the record of the House, and there they will stay. The Member has made his point.

I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments, before we move on to the next item of business.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

## Private Members' Business

### Hunting of Wild Mammals Bill: First Stage

**Mr Blair:** I beg to introduce the Hunting of Wild Mammals Bill [NIA 43/17-22], a Bill to prohibit hunting wild mammals with dogs; to prohibit trail hunting; to prohibit terrier work; and for connected purposes.

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

### Period Products (Free Provision) Bill: Second Stage

**Mr Catney:** I beg to move

*That the Second Stage of the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill [NIA 39/17-22] be agreed.*

**Mr Speaker:** In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated any time limit on the debate.

**Mr Catney:** As you have stated, Mr Speaker, there is no time limit on the debate, so I will just make my speech. If other Members speak, I will take note and answer them at the end.

Though it may seem that the debate will be a highly directed one on a very specific piece of legislation, the Bill touches on the universal concepts of equality, mutual respect and the right of all citizens to live their lives with dignity. I am proud to advance the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill, but I do so full of the knowledge that it has been a complete team effort. I want to thank the Bill Office team and the drafters for working with me to get the Bill to where I wanted it to be, particularly as they have been inundated with proposals from Members. Their door has always been open, COVID permitting, and they have guided me skilfully through the process. I must also thank my own team, including Ally, for their work on the consultation, and the Bill Office team and Jonny for his research for today, supported by Frank and Christine.

Standing here, I feel the expectations of generations of equality campaigners who have worked tirelessly to get us to this point. I look at the current generation of local campaigners and am in complete awe of their knowledge and determination. People like Katrina McDonnell

from the Homeless Period Belfast, Alexa Moore from TransgenderNI, and Grace Boyle, who runs the Northern Ireland Period Poverty Action Group, have given me crucial advice and helped me throughout the process of getting the Bill to this stage. I have no doubt that they will continue to do so as it progresses through the legislative process. I was honoured to stand with some of those campaigners on the steps outside to encourage Members to support the universal provision of period products.

I thank the Chair of the Education Committee, Chris Lyttle, for his guidance and support, and also for bringing the petition for free period product provision to the Assembly to highlight the need for this legislation. I personally will be sorry to see him leave the Assembly. His calm, astute and beneficial contributions will be sorely missed.

At this stage, I must also mention the work of Monica Lennon in bringing a similar Bill through the Scottish Parliament. The influence of her Bill on mine is clear to see, so much so that, if we were to go back to school, I would justifiably be written up for plagiarism. The Bill is in front of the House only because of her groundbreaking work. I am eternally grateful for her support and guidance.

It is important to understand the dramatic impact of period poverty. Every day, across the world, 800 million people have their period, 500 million of whom lack the proper resources to care for their period. In the UK, a survey by Plan International found that one in 10 girls reported that they had been unable to afford period products.

One in seven reported having to borrow products due to cost issues, with one in 10 having to improvise. That is a very blasé way of saying that one in 10 girls reported needing to use things like toilet roll, old clothes or even newspapers because they could not afford their products. Forty per cent of girls in the United Kingdom have used toilet paper because they could not afford period products. Shockingly, it is estimated that 137,000 children in the UK have missed school days due to period poverty. Further research shows that one in five UK women will struggle to access period products at some point in their life.

### 3.30 pm

When speaking with campaign groups, I learnt about the disturbing link between domestic abuse and period poverty. I listened to mothers who told me about using food banks to get

products so that their children could eat, and to workers who had to choose between paying for the train to go to work or buying tampons. That cannot be acceptable.

However, as important as it is, the Bill is about more than period poverty. In fact, its main goal is to make the provision of products universal, like any other form of healthcare, and to allow those who menstruate to do so with dignity. That is not radical or extreme. It is the right thing to do. It is about saying that menstruation is normal, and, therefore, free universal access to tampons, pads and reusable options should be normal, too.

The importance of that aspect of the Bill cannot be stressed enough. A survey of over 1,000 UK girls found that half are embarrassed by their period and are afraid to ask for help because of that. YouGov found that 43% of girls have witnessed their peers being bullied or shamed about their period. According to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) period poverty survey of August 2021, 53% of pupils who menstruate felt embarrassed buying period products, while 56% had to ask to borrow from a friend or teacher. A quarter of the population has their period at any given time. How can we still have that level of stigma around such a normal bodily function?

I will take a moment to talk about the main clauses of the Bill. Clause 1 places a duty on the Department of Health to make sure that period products:

*"are obtainable free of charge (in accordance with arrangements established and maintained by the Department) by all persons who need to use them."*

That should be read in conjunction with clause 3, which is central to the entire Bill. It states that any arrangements established by the Department must make free period products available in a way that is reasonably accessible and respects dignity; a reasonable range of products should be available; and the scheme must be advertised. The idea is that the Department has discretion in the precise arrangements made.

Members may be aware of the c-card scheme for obtaining condoms, and the Department may be minded to do something similar for period products. However, any such scheme must also take into consideration those who cannot register for a card. Provision in clause 1 allows for products to be obtained by another person on behalf of those who need them and for products to be delivered.

Clause 1(2) allows a person to obtain sufficient products to meet their needs "while in Northern Ireland." For those who live in Northern Ireland, under clause 1(8), that means all their needs, including when abroad on holiday. Anyone visiting Northern Ireland can obtain the products that they require during their stay. The Department must consult on its proposed arrangements, and the consultation results must be published. The location of where the products are available must be published annually.

Clause 2(1) places a separate duty on each Department to specify via regulations which of the public service bodies within their functions must make period products obtainable free of charge in their premises. In addition, regulations must be made to specify the bodies that are listed in clause 2(2) so that free period products are made available from healthcare locations and educational establishments. I wanted there to be as much flexibility as possible, so clause 2(3) allows for the products to be supplied by the public body or a third party. The best location in the premises may also be specified. I highlight the restrictions in the number of products that are available under clause 2(6). It is important to distinguish between the universal scheme that is proposed in clause 1 and the provisions that are set out in clause 2. Clause 1 provides period products to fulfil all of a person's needs, while clause 2 aims to supply products that a person might require at a specific place and time.

The use of the scheme in clause 1 will reduce the need for a person to use the provision in clause 2, but it is very unlikely to eradicate that need. It was, therefore, important to make products available under the provision in clause 2, but also to limit them so as not to overburden public service bodies and not to have extensive over-provision and wastage.

Regulations under clause 2 are subject to the affirmative procedure, which will be approved by resolution of the Assembly. Clause 2(10) allows regulation on public service bodies to take effect on different days. That is to allow a consultation to be carried out and published before the statement is produced.

As I said earlier, clause 3 requires the Department of Health and specific public service bodies to ensure reasonably easy access to products, to respect dignity, to make a reasonable choice of types of products obtainable, and to publicise their availability. Clause 3(2) provides that arrangements that are established and maintained by specific public service bodies:

*"must provide for period products to be obtainable at all times when the ... public service body's premises are in use, whether or not in use by the public."*

Clause 4 requires each Department to issue guidance to public service bodies to support them in the exercise of their duties under clauses 2 and 5. That guidance must be fully consulted on. Clause 5 requires public service bodies to publish a written statement describing how they have developed their arrangements for the provision of free period products with regards to the guidance from the Department.

Clause 6 requires each Department, individually or jointly with another Department, to publish information about the location where free period products would be available from public bodies. The Departments may choose how best to do so. That is a distinct and separate duty from that which is imposed by clause 3, which requires the Department of Health and public service bodies to publicise the locations at which products must be available under the arrangements that are set out in clauses 1 and 2.

Clause 7 provides definitions for three key terms that are used throughout the Bill, namely "period products", "types of period products", and "references to a person's needs". Sustainable options are explicitly allowed for under clause 7(b).

Regarding the use of gender-neutral language in the Bill, the Equality Commission and the Bill Office made it clear to me that all legislation requires such language. I spoke with many women's groups, all of which told me very clearly that the use of gender-neutral language did not take away from the impact of the Bill for them or the importance of the Bill for women. They said that they did not want to see a Bill that did not provide for all people who have periods. There is no doubt about the impact that the Bill's provisions will have on women and girls. There is a need for more women's voices to be heard on all issues and for more women to be represented in the Chamber. It is my hope that the Bill represents a small step towards rectifying the situation.

Clause 8 provides definitions for other terms that are used in the Bill, using existing statutory definitions as far as possible. Clause 9 allows for different clauses to commence on different dates. That allows time for a full consultation and for guidance to be published. The Executive Office can then appoint, by regulation, commencement dates for the key

clauses, but it must do so within two years of Royal Assent.

I have sent the Bill to all my original consultees, including the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission. I have also opened up dialogue with members of the Health and Education Committees and with all parties and independent Members in the Assembly. I do not suggest for one minute that I am perfect when it comes to creating legislation, so I am open to any and all discussions on how the Bill can be improved. I ask that we improve it as best as we can.

To conclude, the Bill is about equality, dignity and the Northern Ireland that we want to see. Period products are essential healthcare products for all those who menstruate, not luxury products. We recognise the complex needs of those who menstruate. That includes not only includes women but trans men and those who are intersex. The Bill aims to be inclusive for all who have faced period poverty. We must break down the barriers of period stigma and provide inclusive education in raising awareness of period dignity. Nobody should feel ashamed about their period, and nobody should have to experience period poverty in today's society. I hope that the general principles and aims of the Bill will be accepted by all in the Chamber.

**Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education):** I commend the Bill's sponsor, Pat Catney MLA, for the work that has gone into the Bill and, in a personal capacity, thank him for his very kind words to me.

I support the general objective of the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill and its passage to Committee Stage. However, as acknowledged by the Bill's sponsor, significant work on it will be required by a number of Assembly Committees, including Education, Health, Economy and perhaps even Finance, together with the Bill's sponsor, to ensure that fit-for-purpose legislation can be enacted on this important matter. The Education Committee has agreed in principle to act as the lead Committee for the Committee Stage of the Bill, but we will need the partnership of other relevant Committees for the timely completion of our work.

The work to address period poverty and ensure period dignity has made significant progress in recent years. The Assembly Education Committee has worked for some time in support of free period products in schools in Northern Ireland. It was my privilege to invite the charity, the Homeless Period Belfast, to give evidence

to the Education Committee and to present a petition to the Assembly in December 2020 for free period products in schools on behalf of over 5,000 people. The campaign for that provision was led by the Homeless Period Belfast. That volunteer-led initiative, which was founded and is managed by Katrina McDonnell, works to alleviate period poverty by providing period packs and campaigning for universal access to free period products, like a number of other organisations such as Red Box and EqualityPeriod. The Homeless Period Belfast's Menstruation Matters campaign called on the Education Minister to bring Northern Ireland into line with other parts of the UK by providing free period products in all schools. The Menstruation Matters campaign argued persuasively that we would never accept children having to bring essential items like toilet roll, hand soap and hand towels to school and that period products should be no different.

### 3.45 pm

The Homeless Period Belfast conducted a survey of 200 girls in Northern Ireland that found that 74% left school early or missed school because of a lack of period products. Some 87% said that a lack of period products negatively impacted on their attention in class, and 91% had used toilet roll as a temporary measure due to a lack of access to period products. In a Homeless Period Belfast survey of 100 teachers in Northern Ireland, 60% had bought period products for use in their school. The survey also asked pupils how access to free period products would impact on their experience at school. One girl said:

*"I wouldn't miss as much class time and I would feel a lot happier knowing the products are in toilets, so I don't have to feel embarrassed approaching the school nurse or my teachers."*

Another girl said:

*"I dread getting my period in school. I have to make up that I am sick so I can go home because I'm too embarrassed to tell my friends that I don't have any money for pads and I can't ask my mummy because she's just lost her job and she's already struggling to do a food shop for me and my younger brother. I use toilet roll instead and I'd much rather use that at home and risk leaking in my own house than in school where everyone could see."*

No young person should have their education disrupted by a bodily function as natural as their

period. Free period products in schools ensure that every child has equal opportunity to learn and achieve their potential.

The Education Committee also wrote to the Education Department expressing its support for free period products in schools and welcomed Executive funding for the free period products in schools pilot launched by former Education Minister Weir. It is my understanding that it was also launched in higher education institutions by former Economy Minister Dodds. However, I agree with the Bill's sponsor that it is clear that more needs to be done.

It seems to me that the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill seeks to achieve that aim and to enact provision in Northern Ireland that is similar to legislation seeking to eradicate period poverty in the rest of the UK. In the rest of the UK, the objective is to provide free period products in schools, colleges and universities. Scotland has the potential to extend that provision to include public buildings. I support the ambition to deliver a similar model in Northern Ireland.

It is time to address the clear call for action on the matter. It will require significant work, and I know that the Bill's sponsor is up for that work. The Bill has the potential to be another important step forward for the campaign to destigmatise menstruation, eradicate period poverty and deliver equal opportunity and dignity for people who menstruate in our community.

**Mrs Cameron (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health):** I thank the Chair and members of the Education Committee for agreeing to take on the Committee Stage of the Bill. With the heavy legislative workload of the Health Committee and given the cross-cutting nature of the Bill, that will ensure that the Bill receives the necessary scrutiny at Committee Stage. The Health Committee will support the Education Committee in whatever way it can to progress the Bill should it pass Second Stage.

I will now comment as a DUP MLA. I support the Bill, and I commend Mr Catney for the constructive way that he has gone about the issue of provision of free period products and for his passion and determination in advancing the matter.

It is often the way in Northern Ireland that certain issues are almost taboo. They are not talked about and are kept to the privacy of a room. Those needing help are left on their own to undertake a very personal and difficult journey or life episode. It is a welcome

development that we in Northern Ireland are now much more open to conversations. In the context of the Bill and the whole issue, it is important that we enable women and girls to be open about talking about menstruation.

It is equally important, however, to ensure that no woman or girl lives in period poverty. I am pleased that my colleague the former Education Minister and Member for Strangford Peter Weir received Executive approval to provide free period products to all schools in Northern Ireland. That was due to commence in September 2021.

Likewise, my friend and colleague from Upper Bann Diane Dodds, as Economy Minister, introduced a one-year pilot project with Northern Ireland's higher education institutions to address period poverty. Period products will be provided free of charge during the academic year for students attending Ulster University, Queen's University Belfast, Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College.

My party has led the way in addressing the issue, and we welcome the three broad policy objectives in the Bill to further address period poverty in society. Some areas of those objectives need clarity, and I will seek to address some of them in my comments. A question that must be asked about any Bill is, of course, what the cost implications will be. Rolling on from that question is the need to ask how universal provision will be made a reality. How will this work? How will people in need be guaranteed the provision of period products that we want them to avail themselves of?

We need to look at how similar provisions are made in Scotland, for example, and learn lessons from the elements of that scheme that work and from those areas that need improvement and in which we can do better in Northern Ireland for local women and girls.

On access points for products, we need to be bold and do better. Schools and other learning institutions are natural places to provide the products, but so, too, are GP surgeries and community pharmacies. As we have seen throughout the pandemic, community pharmacies are increasingly the first port of call for a readily accessible local resource not only for prescriptions but for professional advice on dealing with many ailments.

We must engage our women and young girls in the conversations and let them tell us where the products should be made available and what shape the roll-out should take. Their feedback

is vital. We in the House should not decide for them. Consultation is, as always, key to ensuring the most effective scheme possible.

This is about providing much-needed support for women and girls. To be clear, the scheme ought to apply to "women" and "girls". In the interests of making good law, that should be clarified in the final version of the Bill.

The Assembly is often criticised for not making a difference or for getting bogged down in irrelevance and not dealing with the issues that impact most on our constituents. Maybe that is a fair criticism — not always but sometimes — but, with this Bill, we can make a difference to the lives of thousands of women and girls across Northern Ireland. I support the Bill and look forward to seeing it deliver benefit for the women of South Antrim and all Northern Ireland.

**Ms Brogan:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. The topic is important, as is the legislation, which has gone a long way towards shining a light on the issue, removing the shame and embarrassment around periods and giving us an opportunity to ensure that nobody in the North suffers from period poverty. I congratulate the Bill sponsor, Pat Catney, and I thank him for bringing the Bill to the Floor.

The facts in support of the Bill speak for themselves. One in 10 of those in need of period products is unable to afford them at some time in their life. One in seven reports struggling to afford period products. Research among girls found that 49% had missed a day of school because of their period. Others have spoken about the difficulties of accessing products and managing menstruation where facilities do not match their need.

A number of international obligations also underpin support for the Bill. Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), there should be no barriers to accessing education, and girls should have access to appropriate and sufficient products to manage their periods as well as the right to manage their periods with dignity.

As party spokesperson on children and young people, I am particularly concerned about the impact of period poverty on attendance at school, as outlined by the Chairperson of the Education Committee. Along with poverty, attendance levels are a factor known to drive the educational gap between our most and least advantaged children and young people. All affected by this issue need access to period

products. Equality and human rights demand that those needs be recognised and met.

In the past, for women and girls, menstruation was one of many aspects of their lives that was shrouded in secrecy and even shame. That was not an accident; it was part of a wider system of control and marginalisation. Secrecy and shame underpinned the mistreatment of women in mother-and-baby homes, and they often underpin violence against women and girls. Against that backdrop, the provision of period products might seem like a small step. Even if it is a small step, it is a vital step.

Recognition of menstruation is a public as well as a private matter. It challenges misogynistic attitudes that view women as "other" and women's business as "outside". The cycle of women's lives from menstruation to menopause must be mainstreamed and recognised as part of the whole human experience. I support the Bill, and I hope that it makes it through to Committee Stage so that the Education Committee can go into greater detail.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the debate this afternoon. I thank Mr Catney for bringing the Bill to the House for debate.

As we all know, period poverty is the lack of access to sanitary products due to financial constraints. In the UK, sanitary products are taxed at 5%, a levy that is blamed on the EU, which sets tax rates on certain products. Period products are not and should not be classed as luxury items. They are essential items that cost the average woman £5,000 over a lifetime, and that figure is rising as the cost of living increases.

It is estimated that over 137,000 children across the UK have missed days at school because of period poverty. We need to recognise the huge significance that that has for our children's futures. We need to realise that it is an issue throughout our society and that we must do what we can for all the women and girls who constantly struggle with their rising general day-to-day expenditure and other essential products becoming more expensive all the time.

It is unacceptable that some women are forced to do without sanitary products simply because they are unaffordable. In Northern Ireland, one in seven girls struggles to afford sanitary wear. The embarrassment that that causes is immense, and it directly relates to the rise in mental health issues. Evidence has shown that children are all too aware of money problems in their home, and some may not wish to burden

their parents further by asking for money that simply is not there in the first place.

Periods carry a stigma and an embarrassment. That is because the subject is not openly discussed. The ongoing discrimination against 50% of our population needs to change immediately. Periods are a natural process that we all go through. We cannot choose when we start having them and when we stop, and we cannot prevent them. Consequently, we should not be penalised for requiring those essential items.

It is long past the time for talking and discussions. I find it incredible that, in the 21st century, we are discussing such a taboo subject as women's intimate health or the lack of provision for it. My firm belief is that steps need to be taken to rectify the injustices that so many still face. Ultimately, the elimination of period poverty must be prioritised. The disadvantages faced by so many women and girls must be challenged, and the stigma and taboo associated with periods and period poverty must be brought to an end. In November 2020, Scotland became the first nation in the world to take such a step against period poverty by making sanitary products free for all women. We need to follow that example.

**4.00 pm**

**Ms Flynn:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill as an MLA, as a member of the Health Committee and as a woman. Rosemary has just mentioned the fact that period products are not luxury items; they are essential items in the life of every girl and woman. We all need them. They are also costly, particularly when income is limited. Period care is essential healthcare, and monthly menstruation is a natural biological process that is out of our control and to which we need to attend. Period poverty means that financially struggling families face the additional stress every month of trying to find money to have those basic essential items at hand and in their home. It is unimaginable that anyone should dread the arrival of her period each month because she cannot afford the products that she needs.

Nicola covered the fact that period poverty affects attendance at school and can and does have an effect on the academic achievement of many girls, particularly those from the most deprived communities. The example that was used by the Chair of the Education Committee, Mr Lyttle, was powerful. The experience of that young girl who was worried about going home and letting her mother know that she needed period products, because she was fearful that

her mummy could not afford them, is the experience of many other children and young girls.

Stats have been quoted that show that one in seven girls and women have said that they struggle to afford their sanitary products and that one in 10 have, at some point, been unable to afford them. We know that period poverty affects people in a variety of ways. One of the most awful things is that it can make women feel embarrassed or ashamed of their periods. That is wrong, because they are a fact of life. Of course, when people feel that shame and it is mixed in with the stigma that already exists and has existed for too long, it prevents people from talking about period poverty and the shame and embarrassment.

Period poverty causes physical, mental and emotional challenges. From what I have just said about the mixture of embarrassment, shame and stigma, Members will understand why it also presents a mental and emotional challenge for many people. The Bill will, hopefully, go a long way to easing some of those challenges. I am glad that the Bill sponsor is a male. It is a subject that is usually taboo and is seen as a female issue, so I am delighted to see that.

Some figures have been quoted. The sponsor of the Bill said that 800 million people are having periods every day and that, globally, an estimated 500 million people have their period but lack access to the products and hygiene facilities that they need during their cycle. That figure cannot be overstated.

Although period poverty is a widespread problem, there is still a lack of research on the topic, as, I am sure, many of you will have found out before the debate. In 2019, experts from academic institutions, NGOs, Governments, UN organisations and elsewhere came together to form the Global Menstrual Collective to try to solve the issue. The Global Menstrual Collective defines menstrual health as:

*"a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease"*

or problems. Women need to have holistic care, treatment and support as they go through their monthly cycle. The Global Menstrual Collective also states that people should have access to information about menstruation, life changes and hygiene practices; the ability to care for themselves during menstruation; access to water, sanitation and hygiene services; the

ability to receive a diagnosis for menstrual cycle disorders and access to healthcare to help with those; and a positive, supportive environment in which to make informed decisions, including decisions on participating in daily activities, such as going to work or school. Even when you take into account only that small number of recommendations made by the Global Menstrual Collective, you can see that we have a lot more to do to give menstrual support to those who need it. The Bill's introduction of free period products will go a long way, and seeing that progress is a great first step. It needs to be welcomed.

We know that being unable to manage a period with appropriate menstrual products can make people feel upset, distressed and uncomfortable. The limited research that has been done has found that the impact of that can affect people's mental health. While the Bill is welcome, it is important to recognise the broader issues around poverty, not just period poverty. Some of that has been touched on, but, in aiming to deal with this issue, we need to view period poverty as part of the wider issue of poverty. We know that poverty, never mind period poverty, disproportionately impacts on women and girls as it is. The Bill is welcome, but we need to look at all of those things in the whole.

Mr Catney outlined the Bill's objectives, and I am happy to support each of those individually, because we need to work towards improving access so that people have the products that they need. As I said, it is not good enough or right that so many people cannot afford access to the products and, as a result, suffer unfairly and mentally. We need to change that. I commend the Member for introducing the Bill, and I am happy to support it at Second Stage.

**Mrs Dodds:** I support the Second Reading of the Bill in principle, although, as the Bill sponsor acknowledged, there are issues in the Bill that need to be addressed. I look forward to engaging with the Bill sponsor at Committee Stage.

At the outset, let me say that I support any step that the House takes to provide period products to women and girls who need them. A survey by Plan International UK found that, in the UK, one in 10 young women between the ages of 14 and 21 cannot afford to buy sanitary products and that one in seven struggle to afford them. That is a very concerning situation. It impacts on a person's dignity but also on their ability to get ahead in their education and career. For many women, success in careers and life chances has been hard-won, and

missing out on those life chances because of period poverty is a dreadful thought.

The Bill comes on the back of steps that have been taken during this Assembly term to address the issue. I am glad that we are not only taking steps to address the issue but talking about it and addressing it in an open session of the Assembly. It is important. During my time as Economy Minister, I launched a pilot scheme to address period poverty in higher education institutions, and that scheme provides period products for students attending Ulster University, Queen's, Stranmillis and St Mary's. The scheme was launched in September, and I understand from Department for the Economy officials that there is a strong uptake of the scheme, perhaps reflecting the need for such a scheme. We cannot and should not countenance a situation where young people attending those institutions might miss out on attendance at class, work placements or, indeed, examinations owing to the inability to access products. The Education Minister has just announced £2.6 million of funding to cover period products in schools and youth facilities. Those are all positive and welcome steps in addressing the issue, but we always want to see more being done to ensure that women and girls have their rightful place in education and the workplace.

While I support the principle of the Bill at Second Stage, there are issues with it that we need to talk about. One of those is the language of the Bill. We have to be open and honest and address the issue in the context of women and girls. I would like to see the language of the Bill reflecting that by its Final Stage.

The Bill sponsor, when he was going through —

**Ms Bradshaw:** Will the Member take an intervention?

**Mrs Dodds:** No. I want to continue.

The Bill sponsor, when he was going through the Bill, made much of the reference in clause 1 to products being available to people while they are in or visiting Northern Ireland. That brings me to an important issue with any legislation that we should and need to explore much further, and that is the cost involved. The explanatory and financial memorandum indicates that the Bill sponsor believes that the cost for schools would be around £2m per annum and less than £1m per annum as it becomes embedded and that the universal scheme should not cost more than around £3m

per annum. I am not sure where those figures came from and how they were estimated. Certainly, we need to address that and have much more substantial information on the cost and, in particular, on that clause where — I apologise: I cannot find it at the moment — the Bill sponsor talks about people who are visiting Northern Ireland.

Clause 3 is important. Preserving someone's dignity when they access period products is hugely important, and there should be a reasonable way of doing that. That is an extremely important element of the Bill. The Bill puts an onus on the Minister of Health, making it a responsibility to ensure that product is available. As many others across the Chamber have said, access to period products is about eradicating poverty and providing opportunity, and it is about education and employment. I would like to see a more cross-cutting element in the Bill, because it will touch on many areas across the Executive. It will touch on Health, Education, Economy and Communities. It is about equality for women and girls and equality of opportunity.

In principle, I support the Bill. I have outlined reasonably, I hope, some of the things in the Bill that we need to address and some of the issues on which we need a greater depth of information before it can progress. I look forward to engaging with you at Committee Stage.

**Ms Sheerin:** I also support this important Bill, and I commend Mr Catney for introducing it. It is particularly timely, given the conversation that we are having at the minute about the rising cost of living and the household bills that have skyrocketed this year in particular. The Bill will address an inequality that is intersectional, removing a pressure point specific to people living in poverty who also menstruate.

The mental and emotional stress that those living in deprivation bear on a daily basis cannot be overstated. It is a failure on all our parts, as a society, that there are families across the North for whom Christmas is a cause of dread instead of excitement.

It is shameful that, in 2021, children are going to school hungry and that many of our elderly have to choose between eating or heating their homes. For those who cannot afford to put food on the table and who physically cannot pay all their bills, every necessity causes a strain. For those who menstruate, period products cannot be done without and, therefore, cause a strain.

#### 4.15 pm

As has been said, this issue affects 500 million people across the world. That is, frankly, a frightening statistic. When we think of the emotional strain that is often connected to menstruation and the impact that monthly hormonal fluctuations can have on a person's mood, it is not hard to imagine how both stressors would coalesce and negatively impact a person's mental well-being.

The practicalities of a lack of hygiene products at that time of the month would make many daily tasks impossible. You can see how anyone who is expected to work in public whilst in that position would struggle. In addition to that, the risk of toxic shock syndrome is heightened in a situation where products cannot be replaced regularly. There is an obvious health risk that can be fatal.

As someone who grew up with privilege in a safe and happy home, with access to everything that I ever needed, I cannot imagine the pressure and strain that that causes. For parents with young girls who are going through puberty, being unable to provide those items is bound to be soul-destroying. To be a young person worrying about that change in your life, with this sudden burden that announces the dawn of adulthood and can cause side effects ranging from digestion issues to unexplained emotional outbursts, is hard enough. To have to do it without access to tampons and towels is cruel.

I know that, as an adult, just as you sometimes only realise that you have run out of milk when the tea is wet, it is easy to sometimes forget to stock up on period products or to come to work without a supply. I cannot be the only one who has fought with dispenser machines that, for some reason, are not taking the coin that they are supposed to. If Building Services are watching, I had nothing to do with one of the machines almost hanging off the wall in the ground floor bathroom beside us. Nevertheless, the stress and paranoia that that causes is unbelievable.

It sometimes feels as if women's healthcare issues have always played second fiddle. The level of ignorance and misinformation that women and girls often experience when presenting with what should be a simple problem is a huge cause of concern. Our periods are just one example of a normal part of the female experience that is still shrouded in mystery for many and, if we are honest, is still taboo across the world. The fact that the advertising of those products is itself a cause of

controversy and that the weird blue substance that is synonymous with maxi pads is something that we can all conjure up in our minds is a testament to that.

I have a friend who, as a teenager, went to her GP because of painful periods that confined her to bed for days at a time and meant absence from school. She was told by a male doctor, "That's what a period is", before being offered the contraceptive pill. I had irregularities as a teenager, with inexplicable months of missed periods that caused me serious anxiety. Again, I was offered no explanation but the pill to regulate. Women and girls are self-medicating with boxes of Nurofen — another cost from their teenage years — shutting up and putting up, experiencing mood swings, severe cramps and abdominal pain and are being told that there is nothing wrong with them, often then to be offered a hysterectomy in their 30s without any proper investigation. It takes years to get a diagnosis for polycystic ovaries or endometriosis, if you ever get one at all. Problems with vaginal mesh implants are dismissed, and the waiting list for removal is scary. Years and years on hormonal contraception can have unthinkable consequences for a woman's body, which is something that is rarely communicated at the initial point of prescription.

One Bill is not going to eradicate all those stressors on people who menstruate or, indeed, for their families and loved ones who are no doubt impacted. However, it does go some way. I congratulate the Bill sponsor and its writers for ensuring that the provision of those products free of charge must be done in a way that maintains the service user's dignity and, I hope, in a confidential and discreet manner. I also encourage the Bill writers to consider whether those provisions could be widened to, perhaps, cover additional public spaces, including facilities such as homeless shelters, hostels and domestic violence shelters.

I look forward to the Bill's progress through Committee Stage. I applaud its inclusive nature to provide for all people who menstruate. I thank the Bill sponsor.

**Mrs Erskine:** I thank Mr Catney for sponsoring the Bill. I support its general aim, which is to ensure the free provision of period products to all women throughout Northern Ireland. Its aim should be rather straightforward. However, having listened to the airwaves today and some of the language that was used, I feel that it is being hijacked by some ridiculous politicking. I regret that that, sadly, has taken away from

what is a very important and valuable piece of legislation.

Like my colleagues, I want to ensure that women and girls are reflected in the Bill. At its heart are young girls and women, who have to choose between attending and not attending school or work because of the shame that they may feel at not having adequate sanitary provision. Women and girls are in period poverty, and they deserve to be supported. Making a difference in that regard would signify a huge generational change, as, for young teenagers, forgetting to take period products to school would no longer be a cause for concern. That would be hugely significant. We also have to remember those who live with conditions, such as endometriosis, that mean that their periods are heavier. Access to period products in public spaces would really help those women to lead normal lives.

During the COVID pandemic, some relied on public spaces to access period products. That support has now gone and the distress that that caused to women and girls was huge. The health risks from being unable to change period products regularly have been mentioned in the Chamber today. That is having a detrimental impact on our economy and on ensuring that women have the skills to go forward in society. Women should be able to break the glass ceiling in every walk of life. Any blockage that is in the way should be removed. That includes access to period products.

I would welcome the continuation of the efforts that were first initiated by our previous Education Minister, Peter Weir MLA, who brought a proposal to the Executive to ensure the provision of free period products in schools in Northern Ireland. I welcome that that initiative began in September. I must also praise the efforts of my colleague and friend the former Economy Minister, who introduced a one-year pilot project to ensure the free provision of period products during the academic year to students who are attending university.

As the Bill progresses, the first priority should be to ensure that access points are widely available to all women who are seeking to avail themselves of free period products. That would be through facilities such as health centres and pharmacies, as well as our schools and university campuses, so that young girls and women can access those products. I strongly encourage that the feedback that was gathered from the existing schemes that I talked about is studied and fed into the Bill to ensure that the most effective means of distribution of those free period products is achieved.

Many of those who suffer from period poverty, and who will avail themselves of those products, may have wider issues and be dependent on other supports, such as food banks. Therefore, as the Bill progresses, the Assembly should also focus on how to tie it into a larger strategy to ensure that those who are suffering in poverty can receive better strategic support to assist them and their families.

It is important that young women and girls do not feel any shame in accessing period products.

**Ms S Bradley:** I support the Bill, and I thank my good friend and colleague Pat Catney for sponsoring it.

Before I begin my speech, I want to say that I am genuinely thankful to all the Members who have contributed to the debate thus far. It has been a very respectful discussion and, at its heart, it is clear that people are concerned about all those who are living with period poverty. It is welcome that the House has united in that common cause while others outside have maybe tried to create moot points. On that basis, I genuinely believe that the Bill is a call to positive action and has already been a catalyst for positive action by others. I thank Chris Lyttle for his work and the Education Committee for agreeing to take the Bill forward. As we know, every Bill has to go through a process, and that requires engagement from all. That is happening, and I welcome that.

The principle of the Bill is to reach all those who are suffering, very often in silence, from period poverty. It serves to correct a basic wrong that has endured for far too long. Period poverty is a social wrong that is desperately in need of correction. The Bill is an attempt to do that.

When I researched the detail and the stories, there were many harrowing stories of young girls and women who suffered directly an educational or economic disadvantage due to the fact that they could not access period products. Their personal development is affected because there is an absolute loss of confidence when somebody is silently trying to manage that situation. I am really thankful that the Bill speaks to that. It reaches out to empower people who otherwise are feeling disempowered by a very natural life event. Period poverty creates barriers to living the normal life that you should expect to be able to live and to being able to engage with others. For people to self-isolate because they do not have period products and to remove themselves from society is a real indictment on

us if we cannot find a way to reach all those people.

I sit on the Justice Committee. During our deliberations on the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill, it became apparent how many women are the subject of coercive control and are caught up in domestic violence. One of the tools and levers used against them is access to money and being able to go out and spend money as they need. An obvious thing in that situation would be to access period products. This subject can lie in dark places in society, and these people are desperately in need of our help. Therefore, I am genuinely thankful to Pat Catney for sponsoring the Bill.

The House is under a lot of pressure, Mr Speaker, as you are aware, in terms of the legislative ambition for the remainder of the mandate, but this is certainly one Bill that I hope will cross the line. I go back to my point about how respectful the debate has been. This is the Second Stage, and I have yet to stand in the House at the Second Stage of any Bill and say that it is tickety-boo and nothing needs to be fixed or amended. People have made valuable and valued comments in a respectful way. I take great comfort from meeting the sponsor of the Bill, Pat Catney, in that he is very much open to discussion about how the Bill could look at its Final Stage. I encourage all Members to get engaged in that and to bring through the Committee, directly to the Member or as an MLA their own mark to the Bill and add value to it. There were examples today of how value could be added to the Bill, and I encourage that.

That the Bill is being sponsored by a man, which I welcome and was mentioned, is a good way to break any taboo that may exist. This issue affects society at large. Whilst we are right to focus on the woman or girl who is hoping not just that there is toilet paper but that it is of a decent quality, or is thinking about whether she spends her lunch or bus money on period products, no woman or girl should be left with that question. Society has to support all people who are having a period, and nobody should be forced into poverty because their period is due or they are living in fear of it arriving.

#### 4.30 pm

I genuinely welcome the tone of the debate. I welcome everything that has been said and particularly take note of those added-value pieces with which I will be happy to engage. The SDLP door is certainly open. Once again, I thank Pat Catney for the Bill, and I urge you, Mr

Speaker, to use any influence that you have to make sure that it crosses the line.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I support the Bill and thank the Bill sponsor, Mr Catney, for bringing it forward. It is very refreshing to see a male engaging in what has been a taboo subject for far too long. I also thank all the women's groups, in particular the Homeless Period Belfast and, in my constituency, Belfast South Community Resources, which do a lot of really good work at a grassroots level on the issue.

I will not speak for long, and I concur with much of what has been said. However, I want to address the issue of the word "person". As a woman, I take no offence at that, but the word "person" is inclusive, and it gives position and respect to those in the trans community who may need to avail themselves of period products, now or in the future.

I also congratulate the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy for their sterling work in bringing forward pilot projects. It is wonderful that that has happened without the need for legislation. In many ways, the Bill builds on that.

A couple of issues jumped off the page at me. The explanatory and financial memorandum states that, in Scotland, expenditure is estimated at £8.7 million. Here, if you read across, it would be £3.08 million. However, the Bill goes further than that, and I wonder how the costs have been worked out. The use of the term "public service body" is not widely used in Northern Ireland, and I seek clarity on the bodies that are included in that term. Are they charities that deliver on public services under contracts or commissioned services? Going wider than that, I coach 11-year-old girls in hockey, and the Bill is valuable for sports settings. Does "public service body" include leisure centres, where girls change their clothes before and after matches?

I very much welcome the clause for those who live with a disability and the potential for period products to be delivered to them. I would like a little more clarity on how that would be achieved. Would it be from community pharmacists, for example? Have they been consulted?

As the mother of an 18-year-old girl, I am passionate about the issue, and I would have loved to see the Bill come through the Health Committee. If there is anything that I can do to support my colleague the Chair of the Education Committee, I will do so. I would welcome the opportunity to sit down with Mr

Catney and go through some of the finer details that jumped out at me.

**Ms Hunter:** It is a delight to speak on the Bill. As a young woman, I think that this is a day of great significance as this important Bill reaches its Second Stage.

We are here not only to discuss the financial cost of these products but the true cost if they are not provided. What does that reality look like for girls across the North? It looks like embarrassment, shame and stigma, and it is happening right now. The Bill is a crucial first step in tackling a societal issue. To this day, many wince, blush and hush at what is an everyday reality for 50% of the world's population. We have a long way to go in tackling period poverty, but I am absolutely delighted that the Member to my right, my friend and colleague, a father of three girls, introduces the Bill without an ounce of embarrassment but with wholehearted and genuine determination to assist those who need these products and to see the Bill through. We thank Pat for that.

The Bill touches on the importance of free provision across the world to ensure that everyone has access to these products, whether single mothers who cannot afford them or those who are now choosing, as we come up to Christmas, whether to heat or eat. Period products may not be within their budget. The average cost of a period for a year is £128, which is roughly £5,000 in a woman's lifetime. However, the true cost is the shame, stigma and taboo that still surrounds periods.

It is a good time to ask ourselves where we are with education about periods. Can we do better? I agree with Mr Lyttle: I think that we can.

Currently, one girl in 10 aged between 14 and 21 cannot afford menstrual products. Today, approximately 16,000 girls across the North fall into that category. Since lockdown last year, that has risen to three girls in 10. What impact does that have on the overall confidence, well-being and academic achievement of our young girls? As previously mentioned, 40% of girls in the UK have had to use toilet paper because they cannot afford period products — that is 40% of girls who deserve dignity. They deserve free products. The North is the only place in the UK where young women do not have access to free period products. The SDLP's Bill asks the House to put the North on an equal footing with other parts of these islands.

Let us be real: when girls do not have sanitary products, their education, work and livelihoods

are affected. It has an impact on their professional and personal lives. On average, women menstruate for roughly seven years throughout their lifetime, so I assure Members that the issue will not go away.

I thank all the young activists who have been involved in promoting this key issue and who have worked alongside Pat in crafting the Bill. The SDLP is committed to tackling period poverty. All our constituency offices are stocked with period products. We are part of an initiative called Take What You Need, which provides small bags of diverse products to meet the public's needs. We keep the bags in the bathroom; people can close the door; they can take what they need; no one is looking; and there is no judgement. It is all very discreet. It is a small initiative, but we know that people avail themselves of the bags. People come in and use them, so we are aware that they are vital. The products are needed, so it is crucial that people are provided with them.

I am delighted to say that I strongly support the Bill at this stage. I hope that other Members will also support it and that they will continue to engage with Pat as the Bill goes through its stages.

**Miss Woods:** I speak today on behalf of Green Party NI MLAs to support Mr Catney's Bill at Second Stage. I thank him for bringing the legislation to the House. I do not intend to speak for very long, but I want to raise a number of points that the Committee might consider, including the importance of looking at the Bill through the lens of a child's rights, as well as practical considerations and access points.

As others have said, globally, period poverty intersects with other forms of disadvantage, including poverty and geography. It is an issue of gender inequality and should be considered in the context of the full range of human rights treaties, including CEDAW, the European Convention on Human Rights and the UNCRC, which I will touch on later.

As we have heard, steps have already been taken in Northern Ireland to pilot the provision of period products for those who need them. As we know, however, provision is not universal. This year, we saw the long-awaited launch of the Department for the Economy's pilot scheme for provision in further education institutions for a year, as well as the Department of Education's scheme to provide free products for Northern Irish schools. Many businesses are already taking steps and leading on the issue, including, in the hospitality sector, a number of

restaurants and bars — recently, I have seen an increase — that provide free period products. They are alongside the likes of Lidl, which became the first retailer of its kind to provide free products to customers via a coupon scheme that can be used every month.

I will make a few comments about viewing the matter through the lens of a child's rights and how that goes to meet articles in the UNCRC. On World Children's Day a few years ago, in my role as political youth champion, I, alongside a number of other MLAs, attended the children and young people's summit that was organised by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY). On the day, we heard from young people about the issues that they wanted us to consider and take forward, one of whom was Miss O'Donnell, who gave a presentation on period poverty. Her presentation is on NICCY's website. I encourage everybody to look at it, but I will give a brief overview of her comments on that day. It very much stuck with me.

She started by outlining a scenario that I can safely say that I have experienced a number of times. She said, "Picture yourself at work. You're on your way to a very important meeting when you experience a very urgent call of nature. You make haste to the nearest toilets only to find that, in order to get toilet paper, you need to put a pound in the toilet paper vending machine, but you don't have a pound with you. So, what do you do? How do you feel?" She continued, "It's not toilet paper that thousands of girls in Northern Ireland are expected to pay for; it's sanitary products". She asked one simple question, "Why is a difference made between the need for period products and the need for toilet paper?". The answer, of course, is that there is no difference.

Period poverty is unnecessary and unfair, and products should be universally accessible, as they are an essential everyday health product.

As I stated, addressing period poverty can be looked at in the context of human rights. Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC stipulate that there should be no barriers to accessing a broad education that encourages:

*"The development ... of talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential".*

We know that many people who experience poverty miss school and are absent from class. We know that poverty is directly linked to educational underachievement and that it is another way in which poverty disadvantages

young women and girls. It is therefore particularly important, as the Bill progresses, that the Committee hear from children and young people who face barriers because of period poverty. Article 31 explicitly asserts the corresponding right:

*"to engage in play and recreational activities".*

Again, those experiencing period poverty face barriers to play and recreation. Talk to children and young people about where they are playing and where they are taking part in sport. We know that we need to listen to the views of children and young people who are experiencing this now or who have experienced it all before. It is important that their voices be heard and that they be involved with the Department in the design of any scheme developed under clauses 1 and 2, if the Bill passes. It is important that that feedback and information be gained from young people when working out suitable access points.

A practical matter that I raised with Mr Catney and on which I encourage the Committee for Education to engage is the reality of homelessness. As we heard, the Homeless Period does amazing work donating and delivering period products and personal hygiene products to those who face homelessness. As it says, it is particularly difficult and problematic with there being limited or no access to sanitary products, meaning that homeless women are often forced to go without, as well as their having no access to showers. I raise this question in order to get something clarified: if people were trying to access products under the scheme outlined in clauses 1 and 2 and did not have proof of address or had to leave their home address quickly in an emergency and had no ID or card — if it were a card scheme — could they still access products if they needed to? Sinéad Bradley talked about domestic abuse. For somebody fleeing domestic abuse, shelters and support and emergency accommodation could also be looked at as providers.

I previously raised another issue about clause 2, and I know that Mr Catney is considering it. It is about whether the provision of free products in public-sector bodies could be extended to local councils. It is something that I worked on when I was a councillor. Some councils have piloted that scheme, and Derry City and Strabane District Council is one of them. Unfortunately, Ards and North Down Borough Council did not take it forward as a pilot scheme. To be honest, some frankly bizarre conversations were had and bizarre

conclusions drawn about whether people were in financial stress and about what that meant, but that is for another time. I would really like to explore whether councils can be included in the Bill.

Related to that, in council, we also dealt with the provision of bins in public areas. The Committee should be mindful of the lack of adequate bin provision in public toilets and in public bodies. Every public toilet should have a suitable period and personal hygiene product waste disposal facility. It is not OK to have one bin in the communal area of a public toilet beside the wash basins for disposing of period products. I do not want to walk out of a toilet having to wrap up a used product in toilet roll. I would like some privacy. As the Bill recognises, we should all expect dignity at every level of government. I encourage the Committee to consider how that provision could be added. It would mean that the likes of our local leisure centres and local government public buildings could also be included in the Bill. That may have to go to the Department for Communities, but, if it can be done, it is worth doing.

Finally, periods are much more than pads, tampons, Mooncups, cramps and pills. The progression of this Bill through the House gives us all an opportunity to look at the unhealthy narrative around the issue and the idea that it is something of a taboo subject. It is not. It is not somehow unclean, it is not something that people should be ashamed about, and it is not funny. Talking about periods should not continue to be stigmatised. It needs to be part of the public conversation, and I know that the Committee will want to consider that.

On the subject of education, how do we educate children and young people about what is happening to them? Why is it not taught in schools in the long term?

#### 4.45 pm

In Belfast, we saw that powerful street art dedicated to the campaign to end period poverty and empower women was vandalised. That should never have happened. It was defaced and painted over. We should really look at that and how it reflects the stigma that still exists in society. We need a law on public awareness and public conversation around the Bill.

Many of us here will remember our first conversations about periods, be they with family or friends. I personally found it very uncomfortable and felt like it was a really weird conversation to have. Looking back now, I do

not know why that was. It truly goes to the heart of the issue: it is still stigmatised. Perhaps it was just not talked about, but I think there is something in those original, awkward conversations that we all had. Why was it awkward? It is not.

I hope that this Bill goes some way to encourage those conversations in society, in our homes and with our friends and families. I will support the Bill at Second Stage.

**Mr Allister:** I readily support Mr Catney's laudable intent with regard to the issue of free period products for women and girls, and also his compassion in identifying an issue and acting upon it. It clearly is causing great stress and poverty for a number of young women and girls. Therefore, the addressing of that is a necessary and good thing. In the addressing of it, it is quite clear from a number of the contributions that the Bill would assist in bringing dignity to the issue, and also assist something as fundamental as school attendance for young women and girls. That has to be a communal benefit for the whole of society, so that is good.

It is quite clear to whom the Bill is directed. One has only to look at a couple of its clauses. Clause 1(1) is directed at:

*"all persons who need to use them."*

Clause 1(2) mentions:

*"sufficient products to meet the person's needs while in Northern Ireland."*

Clause 2(3) refers to:

*"persons in ... premises who need to use them."*

Then, if there is any doubt that it is for persons who need to use those products, the key definitions in clause 7 say clearly that:

*"references to a person's needs are references to the person's needs for period products arising from menstruation by the person."*

It is quite clear that the need is the need of those who menstruate, and they, of course, are women and girls, and no one else. Therefore, I am somewhat saddened that the Bill's sponsor has allowed himself to fall for the Stonewall agenda of trying to attack gender and remove references to gender from legislation, and therefore —

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

**Mr Allister:** I will in a moment. Therefore, the perversion of gender by the removal of it from the Bill is a retrograde step. Here is a Bill that addresses an issue for women and girls, and yet those words are not used anywhere in this legislation. That seems to me to be foolish and wrong. I will give way.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I just have a question, really. I do not understand why you would think that it would be offensive to women. In the Chamber, should we not legislate for everyone in society and create laws that are inclusive?

**Mr Allister:** If we legislate for free period products for those who need them, we are legislating for women and girls; that is everyone who needs them, end of. Men do not need period products. Boys do not have to go through that experience, yet we had the quite

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

**Mr Allister:** OK, I will give way.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Do you not think that the language that you are using is offensive to members of the transgender community, many of whom suffer from severe mental health issues connected to their gender identity? Do you not think that that is very offensive to them, and that you should modify your tone?

**Mr Allister:** If the biological reality is that only girls and women menstruate and that boys and men are not in that category, why are we shy about identifying in the legislation the people it will help? Mr Catney, to my surprise, was quoted in the press as saying, "Boys have periods too". Boys do not have periods.

**Ms S Bradley:** I appreciate the Member's giving way. This is the Second Stage, and Mr Catney has made it very clear that he is open to any conversation on amendments to the Bill. In making his statement, has the Member given any consideration to those people who were born intersex and who may menstruate?

**Mr Allister:** Biologically, if you menstruate, you are a woman. That is it. If you do not, you are a man. Period products are for women, so why are we following an agenda that wants to deliberately and consciously deny gender distinction? That is the agenda that lies behind Stonewall and others that are seeking to involve themselves in a perversion of gender definition

and distinction. Whether we like it or not, it is there, and why would legislation want to diminish that distinction and fall into that trap?

**Ms S Bradley:** I thank the Member for giving way. I do not want to labour this point, because the principle of the Bill is very important, but I do not think it is simply as black and white as that. I would stand with the Member on very many occasions in not wanting to create a society where gender is airbrushed or cast aside because it is offensive to some, but, on this issue and the possibility of somebody being born intersex, there is a certainly a conversation to be had. I do not think that, for those people, it is as simple as saying that they are male or female. A conversation definitely needs to be had about that, and I would welcome working with the Member on it.

**Mr Allister:** I do not want to unduly labour the point either, because the important principle of the Bill is that we will give free products to those who need them, and I am clear that those who need them are women and girls.

I will quote to the Member what Kathleen Stock, former professor of philosophy at the University of Sussex, said when she got into a controversy about the issue. Her work focuses on gender. She called this approach "intellectually incoherent nonsense". She went on to say:

*"Women and girls are the only people who will ever need period products, and there is nothing wrong with saying that."*

Therefore, in my view, there is nothing wrong with the legislation saying that, and its failure to say it has, unfortunately, drawn it into areas of controversy it did not need to be in. Therefore, I say to the Member that, as the Bill proceeds, that issue will need to be addressed.

There are other issues. Cost has rightly been identified. The figures in the explanatory and financial memorandum seem to me to be more modest than what the reality might be. The Scottish experience and others elsewhere suggest that. That needs to be fleshed out. Of course, it is attractive and easy for us, as legislators, to say, "Everything needs to be done", but we also have to have regard to cost, and maybe there comes a point at which there is some delineation because of cost. We need to get the costs right on these issues.

Other points have been raised. The Green Party MLA made a very legitimate point about sanitary bins and whether their provision should be added to the Bill. There have been questions

about whether the Bill applies to councils. Look at the interpretation section of the Bill. Ms Bradshaw raised a point about what a public service body is. A public service body is defined in clause 8, which states it:

*"means a body—  
(a) constituted by or under an enactment;  
(b) having functions that consist of or include providing public services or otherwise serving the public interest".*

That includes local councils. I am somewhat surprised at the indication that there is doubt about that. A public service body, inevitably, includes a public council as much as it includes a school or a higher education establishment.

There are issues to be fleshed out and addressed. I wish that the Bill had not gone down the road of needlessly invoking controversy on the issue of gender definition. It is quite clear who, and only who, requires the products that it will provide. The principle of the Bill is good. I want to see it refined so that it is not needlessly distracted into other territory.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I proudly support the Bill. It is so positive. I am a bit disappointed in those who have sought to distract from the good work that it seeks to achieve. The inclusive language that is used is to be commended. It does not erase women and girls in any way whatsoever.

The proposal in the Bill is quite simple: make free period products available in schools, colleges and other public buildings. However, this deceptively simple Bill is an opportunity to make a real difference to people's lives. Making free period products readily accessible will help to tackle period poverty, break down the stigma surrounding menstruation and send out a really strong message about health equality. Period products can be expensive, especially for those with heavier flows. As part of the public consultation on the Bill, my colleague Pat Catney found that 45% of respondents struggled to afford period products. He also found that 69% had been forced to use unsuitable alternatives, which is often an utterly degrading and humiliating experience.

There will be those who quote the Tesco Everyday Value price of a pad. First, those are not available in everybody's local shop. They certainly are not available in the coin-operated tampon dispensers that we find in many public toilets. Secondly, such a statement ignores the reality that some people simply cannot afford to spend that amount of money on period products, no matter how relatively small others may consider that amount to be. With the cost

of living and other essential products on the rise, we must do what we can to erase the financial burden on those who are struggling.

As I mentioned, the Bill is also about changing attitudes. By making period products more accessible and emphasising their essential importance, we can begin to dismantle the feelings of shame that continue to make periods a taboo subject for many. It is my hope that we will move quickly past the days of having to secretly slide period products up our sleeve as we go into toilets. I have period products on display at the front door of my constituency office, not hidden away, so that grabbing them is just as normal as grabbing a mask, a tissue or whatever. It means that nobody needs to experience any potential feelings of embarrassment when asking whether we have any available and that everyone can get used to seeing it as a basic everyday product, which it is.

The Homeless Period Belfast does amazing work. It has been campaigning tirelessly to bring about change in access and attitudes. As part of its work, it shared a small-minded comment that it received; it went something along the lines of, "Be responsible for your own body". That would make your blood boil. Would we ever consider saying that to anyone when it comes to toilet paper?

Do we expect people to carry toilet paper no matter where they go? I am sure that you will agree that the idea seems totally ludicrous. We recognise toilet roll as the basic necessity that it is, and it is beyond time for period products to be viewed in the same way. This Bill, along with the efforts of countless campaigners, will help to achieve just that.

## 5.00 pm

I pay tribute to my friend and SDLP colleague Pat Catney. I am very proud of Pat for playing his part in helping to break down the stigma around this issue and working to improve lives. I remember my mum slipping my period products behind my father's back and hiding them under the clothes in my wardrobe. Periods were definitely not talked about in front of my brothers — absolutely no way — and the word "period" was mouthed in the same way that "cancer" was once spoken about. My mother used to mouth the word "period" when asking, "Have you got your period?". That is how it was spoken about in the house. I am sure that every woman who grew up then will have a similar experience. Times have changed. My daughters had a tampon box in the bathroom

that was replenished by their dad: when supplies got low, he was able to see that we needed to buy another box and did so. That is the world that my daughters grew up in.

Let us remember that just because something does not impact us personally, that should not stop us from fighting for what is fair and right. I ask Members to support this fabulous Bill, which I am proud of. I am proud that we, as an Assembly, have had the space to discuss it today.

**Mr Speaker:** There is no ministerial response, so I call Pat Catney to conclude and wind on the debate.

**Mr Catney:** Thanks, everyone, for listening to and helping with the debate. I am a brother of four sisters, I have three daughters and I have three little granddaughters, so it is important to me that no one goes without. This is a small step. I will touch on all the points that were made. I do not want to get too deep, but I say to all Members: I am open to your guidance on making good legislation. This is the Second Reading of the Bill, so we can change it and make it what we want it to be: fit for purpose and good.

I thank all Members who contributed for the way in which the debate was conducted. On far too many occasions, I have been in here and sat through debates in which we have argued about things that may well have been nonsense and where it seemed like the reason that one side had an issue was because the other side were in favour. We are all, collectively, better than that. It has been refreshing to listen to a debate where there has been a good level of consensus and harmony among Members.

As I said at the beginning of the debate, I welcome Chris Lyttle's support and look forward to working with him and the Education Committee to make sure that this is the best piece of legislation possible. I agree with a number of the points raised about the finances and would welcome a deeper discussion on the financial implications of the Bill's provisions, based on information that was provided by the pilot scheme that was proposed by the Department of Education in 2020. The potential cost of period products in schools under the proposed legislation would be around £2 million in the first year and less than £1 million per annum subsequently. That reflects reduced costs as the system of provision becomes embedded. It is estimated that the maximum product cost of a scheme of universal provision of period products is likely to be less than £3 million per annum, accounting for the target

group who experience period poverty. Based on an assumption of high uptake, £3.8 million represents the upper range of the possible product cost. I appreciate that that needs to be discussed further. I also agree that more consultation is needed with the Department so that we get a better idea of how universal provision will become a reality.

Members called for clarity on whether the Bill will impact women and girls. It is indisputable that it will, but, as I said, I am not perfect, and I am happy to speak to all Members on how the Bill can be improved. However, I want to be clear: I want provision for women, girls and all those who menstruate, and I will work to find the language in the Bill that best achieves that. Any change must be in agreement with the Equality Commission and campaign groups.

The point has been well made that period products are not a luxury. They are a healthcare necessity, and that is what the Bill seeks to achieve.

I agree that the Bill is cross-cutting, and there was a large amount of discussion at drafting as to where it should sit. I welcome those discussions continuing so that we get this right. More research needs to be done. This is a broader issue than just period poverty, and I look forward to those discussions happening.

I am glad that the Global Menstrual Collective was mentioned. It is a global campaign, and I am glad that I can play my small part in it.

A number of Members raised some good points about particular revisions that could be added to the Bill. Let me reiterate that I would be delighted to be involved in any discussions that will improve the Bill. I hope that we can have those discussions throughout the next stage, and I will commit to giving them proper consideration when it comes to the stages at which amendments can be made. Quite simply, I hope to engage with Ministers and Departments as they are key to the implementation of the Bill. I hope that we can find consensus on where the Bill complements the good work they are already doing and that we can create a legal framework that allows for the best provision for our citizens in the most effective way.

As I said, the Bill is about equality, dignity and the Northern Ireland that we want to see going forward. Good work has been done with pilots by the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy, but they are exactly that folks: they are pilots. The Bill is about creating statutory provision to allow free

product provision for all who need it. I commend the Second Stage of the Bill to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for that and thank all Members for their very valuable contributions this afternoon.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Second Stage of the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill [NIA 39/17-22] be agreed.*

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the Second Stage of the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Committee for Education.

Members, please take your ease for a moment or two.

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

*Motion made:*

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

## Adjournment

### Strule Shared Education Campus, Omagh

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** In conjunction with the Business Committee, the Speaker has given leave to Ms Nicola Brogan to raise the matter of Strule Shared Education Campus in Omagh. Anois glaoim ar Nicola Brogan chun cainte. I now call Nicola Brogan. Tá suas le 15 bhomaite agat. You have up to 15 minutes to speak.

**Ms Brogan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to highlight the incredibly important issue of Strule Shared Education Campus. It is important to me, and, obviously, to my constituents in Omagh and across West Tyrone. It is particularly important to the young people of West Tyrone, who deserve top-quality education in top-quality facilities.

I thank the Education Minister for being here to respond to the Adjournment debate and for the work that she has carried out for the Strule Shared Education Campus, particularly the ministerial direction that she issued this year to move the project on to its next stage. Although I am grateful to the Minister for that, I secured the debate to make sure that there are no more delays to the project, because the youth of Omagh have waited long enough.

The Department of Education identifies the Strule campus on its website as:

*"a pioneering approach ... [with] opportunities provided through collaboration and sharing".*

The Department cites a number of gains from developing a shared campus. These include the delivery of a 21st-century curriculum in "progressive, modern and flexible facilities", the availability of a wider range of subjects, the sharing of resources and:

*"better connectivity between mainstream and special needs schools."*

More importantly, the Department recognises that strategically placing education at the heart of the community means that young people are connected through education, which filters into the wider community. There is a potentially huge social and educational dividend that can promote and enhance community relations.

The Strule project is not just about a shared campus; it is about a shared vision. That vision transcends mere construction. It offers more than the bricks and mortar of school buildings and facilities. It is a vision that sees the physical structure as the building blocks of a better future for all our children and young people. We cannot hope to wish away the divisions of the past that were often amplified by physical barriers and inbuilt separation. We need to take action to make reconciliation a reality. We have to invest in peace and progress.

It is against that hope that recent increases in the estimated cost and the lengthening timescale for completion should be judged. The Minister recently confirmed that the final cost could run up to £60 million over the original budget and that the date for completion is now 2025. While that is disappointing, an increase in budget and timescale is to be expected in the wake of the pandemic and the outworkings of Brexit.

Delays in the procurement process and the higher cost of construction materials have inevitably led to those rising costs. When I met the Minister's predecessor in January this year, I highlighted to Mr Weir the frustration felt by schools due to the delays. I raised the issue of the state of repair of schools in the Omagh area. That is of real concern to school leaders in particular. I am not sure whether it makes much financial sense to put in temporary fixes, which is another reason that we need to see the project completed.

More recently, I urged the Education Minister to prioritise the campus, and I welcomed the Minister's recent confirmation that the tender to build the five remaining schools is due before the end of this year.

The delivery of this groundbreaking project will see schools with state-of-the-art facilities and will enable pupils to benefit from opportunities provided through enhanced collaboration and sharing. The Strule Shared Education Campus will bring social, economic and educational benefits. It will also provide much-needed regeneration to the town of Omagh and the wider district. Most importantly, its vision will progress us all into a better future with an ethos of sharing rather than division.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I call Thomas Buchanan. You have up to seven minutes.

**Mr T Buchanan:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for securing the debate. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the subject, which has been debated in the House on previous occasions.

I thank the Member for securing the Adjournment debate to highlight again the importance of the Strule Shared Education Campus in Omagh. The campus lies close to the heart of all elected Members from West Tyrone. Irrespective of party, we are united on seeing the development of the site move forward. I thank the Minister for being present at the debate today and for her interest in the progress of the development. She recently visited the Omagh site to get an overall view of where the works were.

#### 5.15 pm

Those of us involved in the project since its inception and the announcement of plans in 2008 never thought that, 13 years later, we would be standing in the House involved in an Adjournment debate with only one of the six schools on the site completed. While there is an air of disappointment about the delays that the site has been plagued with, it is nevertheless welcome that progress has been made, with completion now earmarked for 2025.

The Strule concept did not simply happen overnight. There was a lot of criticism, and it took a lot of lobbying and hard work to get final buy-in from all six schools. I look forward to the completion of the development on the site. Strule Shared Education Campus is unique in that it will have six new schools on individual sites with associated shared education facilities. It will be the only campus in Northern Ireland where pupils with moderate and severe learning difficulties will be educated alongside mainstream pupils. When the development is complete, it will be a model campus for other areas throughout Northern Ireland and beyond.

The opening of Arvalee School in 2016 created an air of optimism that the 2020 completion deadline would be met. It was therefore unfortunate that contamination on the site, procurement difficulties and other issues made it obvious that slippage was imminent. However, it is reassuring that the site preparation works are now complete. The contamination has been remedied, and the site has been engineered to a high specification,

ready for construction works to commence. Perhaps the Minister will give us some indication of where the Department is with the procurement competition for the new work and of when, she envisages, work will commence on the site, when construction will begin and when the diggers and the men with hard hats will be there. That is what we are looking for on the site.

I am conscious that some of the schools are waiting to move to the site. For the last ten years, in anticipation that they would soon be in their new surroundings, they have endured a lack of repair and minor works maintenance to their buildings. I think especially of Omagh High School, which has had real problems with its heating. There is clear evidence of dampness in some areas, flaking paintwork and many other issues. The prospect of moving to a new school site and environment meant that all of that was endured. That is why it is important for the Minister — I will use a good West Tyrone phrase — to keep her foot on the pedal and move the development forward to completion, so that the estimated 4,000-plus pupils who will be on the site will be able to enjoy more pleasant surroundings for their educational attainments.

We are conscious of the overall cost of the project, which has continued to spiral as the years have gone by, particularly in recent times. We have witnessed the cost of materials soar, some to as much as three times their previous cost. We know that £46 million has already been invested in the Strule project and that the estimated cost of completing the project is between £184 million and £185 million. Will the Minister advise how realistic that cost is, given the increased cost of materials?

Should all go according to plan, with a view to completion in 2025, will the required finances be available to allow the development to progress without any financial difficulties or delays? The importance of the project to Omagh, West Tyrone and the wider area, and for the future educational attainment of our children for generations to come, cannot be fully estimated. It is a shared education model for the future, and I hope that we will soon see foundations being dug, steelwork going up and concrete being laid, because then we will know that progress is being made for real.

**Mr McCrossan:** It is a privilege to speak in the debate. As Members have said, the project is vital to constituents across West Tyrone, not just to those in Omagh, the county town of Tyrone. It has long been anticipated that the schools would have been developed by now. I

thank the Member for securing the debate, which has allowed us to discuss the issue and put strongly on record the unified support of the five Members for the West Tyrone constituency.

The Strule Shared Education Campus in Omagh is a majorly significant capital project that has the potential to transform the future of education provision in the Omagh and wider Tyrone area. It involves bringing together six schools and 4,000 pupils and giving them new, state-of-the-art buildings, while sharing first-class facilities on the one site. The development would be transformational for the wider Omagh area and secure much-needed facilities for generations of young people. The project was rightly heralded as being transformational over a decade ago, and, after significant investment and engagement, it was meant to have opened its doors late last year. All that we have been left with in Omagh, however, is delay after delay, which has served only to compound uncertainty over the future of the project: uncertainty for the schools involved and for the teachers, the parents and the pupils. From direct engagement with Minister McIlveen, I know that she, as the new Minister of Education, is dedicated to seeing the project delivered. I appreciate the efforts that she has made in the short time in which she has been in office.

Instead of opening the doors last year to the state-of-the-art facilities, we have only one school on-site. The remainder are left in the wilderness, leaving people wondering when, or if, they can, or will, be delivered within the time frame outlined. To compound the issue further, we were informed only a fortnight ago that the costs of the overall project had spiralled and that we were now looking at a potential overspend of over £60 million, owing to delays in getting the project completely off the ground. As I have said, the Education Minister is dedicated to ensuring that it happens. The spiralling costs of the project are regrettable but unfortunate, owing to the current situation that all similar projects will have faced as a result of the rising costs of materials and construction in today's climate. I understand that there were significant procurement issues for the project, which, ultimately, led to the stalling of works, but it is hard to believe that those issues were not foreseen and that a project path was not in place sooner.

From conversations that I have had about the delays, I also know that one of the major stumbling blocks for the delivery of the overarching project was the absence of an Executive three years ago. That meant that there was considerable uncertainty for

contractors about going ahead with the procurement process, given the considerable risk to them and to the investment that they were putting in. I appreciate and welcome the ministerial direction on the project and the fact that the Minister anticipates its being completed in 2025. That is reassuring. We appreciate the efforts in that regard. Lessons have to be learned about such projects, and a robust, comprehensive plan needs to be in place to ensure that Strule can be delivered fully.

Mr Buchanan rightly mentioned the schools throughout the constituency that our pupils are in. Over the years, many of those schools have been promised new facilities. Those facilities have been long-awaited by the schools, but, unfortunately, they have not benefited from them. The schools are dedicated to seeing the full delivery of the project, however, and they are excited about it.

It would be transformational for Omagh, provided that we have the necessary infrastructure linked to the schools to ensure that they do not add to the congestion of Omagh town, with all its many issues at present. Of course, the long-awaited A5 will also alleviate considerable pressures in that regard.

I thank my constituency colleague Nicola Brogan for securing this important Adjournment debate. I thank the Minister for the efforts so far, and I hope that she will continue to push hard to ensure that we can stick to the time frame, that we can see the delivery of the project by 2025 and that our children, young people and teachers and the people of West Tyrone can benefit from that transformational project, which will not only bring huge benefits to West Tyrone but change how education is delivered across Northern Ireland.

**Mr McAleer:** I welcome the debate this evening and thank my colleague Nicola Brogan for securing it. It is great to see the Minister in the Chamber to listen to the debate.

I have been heavily involved in this project from as far back as when I was a councillor, as has Thomas Buchanan when he was on Omagh District Council. Being a grassroots project is the strength of the project. At the outset, it was driven by visionaries, such as Reverend Robert Herron and Monsignor Joseph Donnelly, by school leaders and by Omagh District Council. The former chief executive of Omagh District Council Danny McSorley and the current chief executive of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, Alison McCullough, played huge roles,

along with school leaders, in driving the project forward.

The project has strong support in the community and, uniquely in this part of the world, there is strong cross-party support and support across all sections of the community as well. I remember that the NI Affairs Committee was on-site when I was in my former role working with Pat Doherty MP. I do not normally quote Tories, but I remember Sir Patrick Cormack, who was the Chair of the Committee at that time, referring to it as a "phoenix-like project". That always stuck with me, because it is a "phoenix-like project" when we take a large-scale site, build it up and grow it into a site where children from all sections of the community can come together and be educated as one.

There are also six new schools at the centre of this. Thomas quite rightly mentioned Omagh High School, but a number of schools, such as Sacred Heart College and others, need new builds. They are not in good shape. The Arvalee School and Resource Centre is already on site. Unfortunately, its former premises were burned down a number of years ago. It is on-site now, waiting for everybody else to come on board. It is great that a special educational needs school will take its place at the heart of that new inclusive project.

The project has so many pedagogic, social and community benefits. It has the potential to deliver a 21st-century curriculum in new and modern shared facilities. Key Stage 4 and post-16 pupils will particularly benefit; they will be, effectively, integrated, because this will enable each of the schools to deliver the entitlement framework and more. That will take the pressure off schools of having to provide the full subjects in their own school. They can network with others. Indeed, the Omagh learning community is doing that already. This will make it even more efficient. Spreading that across the network of schools will allow some schools to perhaps specialise in STEM, linguistics or whatever.

The emphasis is hugely on sharing. There is the shared education centre on-site, which focuses on STEM subjects, art, drama and the sixth form. The sports pavilion has multiple courts and multi-use game areas. That is accessible to the wider community as well, which is a huge benefit for the Omagh area. The council has played a huge role. The walkway is built right through it, and the council and others are looking at the potential uses of the sites that the schools will vacate when they move onto their new site. There is so much

potential for economic development and decentralisation.

### 5.30 pm

As for the wider infrastructure, the Strathroy Link Road is there and Arvalee is on-site. A lot of demolition and site preparation work has taken place on-site to get ready for the main contract. So much progress has been made so far, but there is still so much to do. This is a phoenix-like project. It is iconic and game-changing, and it is in the heart of Omagh town. We talked recently about the need to make progress on our climate change legislation because we owe it to our children. It is the same with this project: we owe it to our children and to future generations to see it through.

**Mrs Barton:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in the Adjournment debate this afternoon on the Strule Shared Education Campus in Omagh, and I thank Ms Brogan for securing the debate. While I represent Fermanagh and South Tyrone, quite a number of pupils in the north Fermanagh area attend schools in Omagh, so, obviously, my great interest in the debate lies there.

I am very aware that a project takes time to plan, develop and progress. However, this development appears to have been taking somewhat longer than most. As I recall, plans for this landmark project commenced long before the planning application was submitted in 2011. Work then began in 2013. It was planned that six schools and more than 4,000 pupils would move to the site of the former army base at Lisanelly. Loreto Grammar School, Omagh High School, Sacred Heart College, Omagh Academy and Christian Brothers' Grammar School were set to get new buildings on the campus alongside Arvalee School and Resource Centre, which opened on the campus in 2016.

The estimated overall cost of the project has risen from £169 million in 2016 to approximately £230 million in 2021. That is an increase of over 36% in five years. To the end of September 2021, the Department had invested some £46 million in the Strule Shared Education Campus programme. That investment has delivered the design, construction and fit-out of Arvalee School and Resource Centre, the Strathroy Link Road to improve the traffic flow to and from the campus and the completed site preparation works. It has also delivered the designs for the core schools and the shared facilities. However, the latest cost estimate is that, from October 2021 to programme completion, a further

investment of £184 million will be required. The complex should have been opened by now, but the latest estimate for opening is September 2025. Hopefully, there will be no more delays.

My greatest concern is for those schools that are waiting to have new, modern premises and facilities. It is unfair on their pupils and staff, who are often learning and working in conditions that are of a much lower standard than those in many other schools and educational settings. That can often result in pupils and staff becoming demoralised, and it can have a negative effect on education and teaching.

The Strule Shared Education Campus in Omagh has a pioneering approach to delivering education. It will bring together pupils from local schools with representation from the controlled, maintained and voluntary sectors. Each school will retain its individuality and ethos whilst maximising the opportunities that are provided through collaboration and sharing. That means that the widest range of subjects will be available to the students on campus. Schools will be able to deliver a 21st-century curriculum in progressive, modern and flexible facilities, aspects of which will be enhanced significantly through the sharing of resources. The campus approach will also facilitate better connectivity between mainstream and special needs schools.

Placing education strategically at the heart of the community means that the young people are connected through education, which filters into the wider community. There is, potentially, a huge social and educational dividend that can promote and enhance community relations.

The main areas of the proposed sharing across the campus are the shared education centre, covering areas such as technology and design, music, drama, art, home economics and sixth-form study; the shared sports centre and sports pavilion that Mr McAleer mentioned, including multiple courts, a covered multi-use games area and spectator seating; and sharing in the core schools for minority subjects and areas of subject excellence.

I understand that there are three overarching objectives that are planned to be achieved through the successful delivery of the school: promoting excellence in educational provision, achieving experience and outcomes through the delivery of exemplary facilities; providing the future delivery of the post-primary estate on an area planning basis that will ensure the delivery of a 21st-century curriculum; and stimulating the further development and regeneration of

Omagh town and the wider district through the provision of facilities that are widely accessible to all members of the community.

I say to the Minister that it is imperative that progress is made on the project. Otherwise, if that is not going to be the case, we must provide substantial investment in the current schools to give them and their pupils a fair opportunity to complete their education in the sector.

**Ms Armstrong:** I am sure that everybody is looking at me and wondering why a Member for Strangford wants to talk about Strule. It is because, over the years, my opinion of shared education has grown and developed. I have to admit that I started off thinking that it was a waste of time and energy. I thought that separate education, bringing children together for part of the day and not all of it, was not the right way. Then, I met the people from the Fermanagh Trust, who talked me through their model. I wish that that model had been introduced throughout Northern Ireland; it is such an opportunity. I hope that Strule will eventually adopt that model.

Today is frustrating, because we have about 4,000 children who are waiting for access to modern, state-of-the-art facilities to learn in. Unfortunately, the Strule project outside Omagh has been dogged by delay, overspending and concerns that were raised by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) and the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO). It is now synonymous with overspend and delay, which means the absolute death knell for any future or further shared campuses. Not all of that, of course, is the Minister's fault — we know about the procurement issues and so on — but it is disappointing that 4,000 children are waiting for what is to come. As everyone in the House knows, Alliance's preference is the integrated model, where children are educated together under one roof. However, we recognise that, given how far along in the process we are, for right or wrong, our priority is to make sure that we provide certainty to the children who are to be educated on the Strule campus and their families.

I have a few questions for you, Minister, and I am delighted that you are here this evening to respond to Ms Brogan's Adjournment debate. I know that ministerial direction has had to be given twice, by two different Ministers, on the Strule project. Is there any possibility that the project will not be delivered? How far above the budget can you go before someone says, "Enough is enough"? What help has been sought by the Department of Education to get

the project progressed and across the line? What state are the schools in that are waiting for new builds? Money is now being spent on maintenance in those schools, but that is throwing good money after bad, because those schools have been waiting an eternity for the new schools to be built.

I am also aware, Minister, that on 11 August 2020, the chief executive of the Strategic Investment Board confirmed that the then Minister had spoken to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in respect of Strule. What was that for? As, I think, Mr Buchanan said, the foot on the pedal needs to happen but not if that means harm to other sectors. I would love to have clarification of whether that meeting with the Treasury was to take more money out of Fresh Start for Strule, when we know that 17 integrated schools are ready to go and there are another five that we await. We do not want that to mean that most of the budget will be taken in one campus.

There are a number of questions there.

There have been criticisms in the House of other projects that have overspent. For example, I sit on the Committee for Communities, and there has been so much criticism of the overspend on Casement Park. Here we are with Strule: another overspend and another problematic project. It is time to bring in anyone that we can to help the Department of Education so that those 4,000 children, their families and the future pupils of Strule do not have to wait an eternity for those buildings to open.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I call the Minister, who has up to 10 minutes to respond.

**Miss McIlveen (The Minister of Education):** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in and respond to the Adjournment debate on the Strule Shared Education Campus in Omagh. I thank the Member for West Tyrone for securing the debate and all those Members who participated in it. The Members who participated were very positive about the programme and are naturally frustrated by the delay in its completion. It is also really good to know that the Member for Strangford has had a Damascus road conversion on shared education.

The Strule campus will be the largest shared education partnership of its kind in the world, bringing together over 4,000 children and young people from all backgrounds, including those with special educational needs. Students and

staff will learn and work together on a vibrant and dynamic campus, where shared experiences will complement high-quality education for all in extensive state-of-the-art facilities. It is a pioneering programme that is designed to encourage cohesion, collaboration and partnership, underpinned by the rationale, vision and objectives of my Department's policy for shared education, Sharing Works.

All the Members who spoke in the debate referenced the significant educational, societal and economic benefits associated with the delivery of the Strule programme. It will be a place where flexible learning and enriched curriculum choices give our young people the freedom and confidence to become the best that they can be, broadening their horizons to support their progression in life, further study, employment and training.

The Strule programme is a top priority for my Department, and I showed my commitment to it earlier in my tenure by issuing a ministerial direction to move to the next stage following Executive endorsement last year. I visited the site many years ago when I was a member of the Education Committee, and I am disappointed that, in 2021, I had to issue a direction to move it forward. That said, I am pleased to report that significant progress is now being made across the programme.

To address the points of Mr Buchanan and other Members about construction, pre-tender engagement with the construction industry was completed in August. The next step is to formally commence a fresh main works procurement competition to build the five post-primary schools and shared facilities. Prior to the release of the invitation to tender, a number of important elements of the programme will be considered, including progress on the ongoing development of the work required to realise the educational benefits, the reconfirmation of the memorandum of agreement, which took place in July 2021, and, as I mentioned, the outcome of engagement with the construction industry. Provided that sufficient progress has been made, the release of the invitation to tender is scheduled for autumn this year and should take place in the next few weeks.

Alongside that, the Department continues to work closely with the six school principals and their teams to build on the culture of sharing in Omagh, albeit within the context of ongoing challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A project plan and business case detailing the work that is required to realise the educational benefits and to pilot various shared education

initiatives prior to the go live is under development.

The Department is developing arrangements for the ownership, governance, funding and management of the campus with the schools and their managing authorities and trustees. The memorandum of agreement was reconfirmed in July between the Education Authority and trustee bodies of the schools that will move to the Strule campus. A vacated sites working group, with representation from owners, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and relevant Departments, is actively considering how best to plan for and manage the future use and/or disposal of the existing school sites. Site-specific disposal strategies have been prepared as a first step in determining plans for their future use. Those plans will be developed in line with, and will feed into, the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council local place-shaping plan.

My officials continue to liaise with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council in relation to the Department's planning application for the proposed development works on Gortin Road and Mountjoy Road, as a revised scheme has now been submitted.

#### 5.45 pm

I appreciate that Members are, rightly, concerned about programme costs and timescales. Up to the end of September 2021, the Department had invested £46 million in the site. That investment has delivered the design, construction and fit-out of Arvalee School and Resource Centre, the Strathroy Link Road to improve traffic flow to and from the campus, and the completed site preparation works. It has also delivered the designs for the core schools and shared facilities.

The latest cost estimate is that, from October 2021 to programme completion, a future investment of £184 million is required. That includes the cost of construction, including a contingency for construction price inflation, risk and optimism bias, staffing the programme, and other running costs, including support being provided to the schools for shared curricular development and implementation.

Costs have risen from the 2016 estimates, largely due to increases in building and site work costs and the potential estimated impact of construction price inflation in future years. We have additional costs that are unique to Strule, including significant site preparation works to transform a former military base into a

site that is fit for schools; significant external roadworks; and a changing pavilion and maintenance building. The designs provide for additional teaching and support accommodation, which is deemed to be within acceptable tolerances, and more ancillary accommodation, which is deemed to be justified educationally and functionally, than would generally be provided for five stand-alone post-primary schools.

To ensure that Strule will promote genuine sharing, equality and full inclusivity, the needs of SEN pupils have been incorporated into the design from the outset. While that adds to the area and the costs, we can be confident that the most cost-effective design has been developed to ensure that the campus functions smoothly, provides optimum facilities and supports learning for all students on campus.

The Strule programme encountered delay in recent years. The delay was caused initially by tendering issues and later by the need for business cost reapproval and funding confirmation following the suspension of the main works contract procurement in 2018. In the past year and a half, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on all aspects of business, and the Strule programme, unsurprisingly, was also affected, with delays in the programme.

Based on the current position, campus construction completion is scheduled for 2025. In advance of the full campus going live, the possibility of opening some facilities — for example, sports pitches — once their construction is complete, will be considered. On the current programme timetable, assuming the successful appointment of a main works contractor and following a pre-construction design period, campus construction is due to begin on-site in the first quarter of 2023.

In relation to Ms Armstrong's query, I do not have the detail of that particular meeting in August 2020. What I can say is that HM Treasury has confirmed access to the Fresh Start Agreement capital funding for the Strule programme through to 2025-26. Flexibilities have been built into that. In December 2020, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury confirmed that all of the remaining £469 million of Fresh Start funding could be re-profiled across the remaining years of the programme: ie, 2021-22 can move to the 2025-26 financial year.

I remain fully committed to delivering the educationally and strategically significant Strule Shared Education Campus programme. I can assure Members that my Department is working

diligently to move to the next stage as soon as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am grateful for the time that you afforded me to respond to the debate. Thank you very much.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Thank you, Minister. That concludes the debate. Safe home, everyone.

*Adjourned at 5.49 pm.*

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