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# Contents

## Executive Committee Business

The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 ..... 1

## Private Members' Business

Climate Change Bill: Second Stage ..... 6

## Oral Answers to Questions

Communities ..... 22

Economy ..... 31

## Assembly Business

Standing Order 10(3A): Extension of Sitting ..... 39

## Private Members' Business

Climate Change Bill: Second Stage (*Continued*) ..... 40

# Assembly Members

Aiken, Steve (South Antrim)  
Allen, Andy (East Belfast)  
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)  
Anderson, Ms Martina (Foyle)  
Archibald, Dr Caoimhe (East Londonderry)  
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)  
Bailey, Ms Clare (South Belfast)  
Barton, Mrs Rosemary (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Beattie, Doug (Upper Bann)  
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)  
Blair, John (South Antrim)  
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)  
Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)  
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)  
Bradley, Ms Sinéad (South Down)  
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)  
Brogan, Ms Nicola (West Tyrone)  
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)  
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)  
Buckley, Jonathan (Upper Bann)  
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)  
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)  
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)  
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)  
Catney, Pat (Lagan Valley)  
Chambers, Alan (North Down)  
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)  
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)  
Dillon, Ms Linda (Mid Ulster)  
Dodds, Mrs Diane (Upper Bann)  
Dolan, Ms Jemma (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)  
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)  
Easton, Alex (North Down)  
Ennis, Ms Sinéad (South Down)  
Flynn, Ms Órlaithí (West Belfast)  
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)  
Gildernew, Colm (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)  
Hargey, Ms Deirdre (South Belfast)  
Harvey, Harry (Strangford)  
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)  
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)  
Hunter, Ms Cara (East Londonderry)  
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)  
Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)  
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)  
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)  
Kimmins, Ms Liz (Newry and Armagh)  
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)  
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)  
Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)  
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)  
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)  
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)  
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)  
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)  
McGrath, Colin (South Down)  
McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)  
McHugh, Maolíosá (West Tyrone)  
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)  
McLaughlin, Ms Sinead (Foyle)  
McNulty, Justin (Newry and Armagh)  
Mallon, Ms Nichola (North Belfast)  
Maskey, Alex (Speaker)  
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)  
Muir, Andrew (North Down)  
Mullan, Ms Karen (Foyle)  
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)  
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)  
Newton, Robin (East Belfast)  
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)  
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)  
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)  
O'Toole, Matthew (South Belfast)  
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)  
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)  
Rogan, Ms Emma (South Down)  
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)  
Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)  
Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)  
Stewart, John (East Antrim)  
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)  
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)  
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)  
Weir, Peter (Strangford)  
Wells, Jim (South Down)  
Woods, Miss Rachel (North Down)

# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 10 May 2021

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Executive Committee Business

### The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021

**Mr Speaker:** The first item of business is a motion to affirm a statutory rule.

**Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):** I beg to move

*That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 be affirmed.*

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

**Mr Murphy:** This annual order is brought about following the Executive's agreement to the 2021-22 Budget, which I outlined to the Assembly in my statement on 27 April.

Today's order sets the two separate regional rate in the pound figures for 2021-22. One applies to households; the other applies to businesses. In setting the rates, the Executive have to consider the impact on business and household finances and the impact on the level of revenue raised for public services.

For the second year in a row, rates are being set in the shadow of COVID-19. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on the economy and on the cash flow of businesses. The relatively high level of commercial rates was already a key concern for businesses, many of which are very small and locally managed. That is why, last year, I provided all business ratepayers with an 18% reduction in the non-domestic regional rate. The order keeps that reduction in place for another year.

The capacity of many companies to pay rates has been further undermined by the pandemic.

COVID created the prospect risk of widespread business closures and, with that, the loss of jobs. Therefore, last year, I provided the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic with a rates holiday. I have allocated £230 million this year to continue that rates holiday for another year.

These measures will help to sustain businesses and the jobs that they provide. Likewise, the freeze on domestic poundage for the second year in a row will be vital to household ratepayers. We already have relatively low domestic charges, and maintaining that low charge will help household budgets. To give ratepayers a two-month break in payments, I have decided to delay again the issuing of rate bills. That will help many ratepayers whose incomes are still being affected by the pandemic.

Taken together, the domestic and non-domestic regional rates that have been set by today's order account for approximately £690 million to the Executive, before the effect of the rates holiday is taken account. That revenue supplements the Executive's block grant and facilitates more expenditure on our health service and on roads, schools, infrastructure and other essential public services.

The regional rate represents just over half of a typical rates bill, with the other half made up of the district rate that is set independently by councils. In total, the rating system is designed to contribute over £1.3 billion to Executive and council funding. My Department has also introduced measures to allow more time for councils to set their 2021-22 rates and to allow greater local flexibility to councils in rate setting. It is welcome that councils adopted a similar approach to that of the Executive, keeping their district rates as low as possible, given the need to shelter homes and businesses from the economic impact of the pandemic.

I turn now to technical matters. The main purpose of the order is to give effect to the poundage decisions that have already been made during the Executive's Budget process by specifying the regional rate poundage for 2021-

22. Article 1 sets out the title of the order and gives the operational date as the day after it is affirmed by the Assembly. Article 2 provides that the order will apply for the 2021-22 rating year through to 31 March 2022. Article 3 specifies 27·9p in the pound as the non-domestic regional poundage that is to be levied on rateable net annual values and 0·4574p in the pound as the domestic regional rate poundage that is to be levied on rateable capital values.

I look forward to hearing Members' comments. I commend the order to the Assembly.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance, Steve Aiken. Let me take this opportunity, given your announcement at the weekend, to wish you and your family the very best in the time ahead.

**Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance):** Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for his remarks. I can assure the House that I will not be retiring from politics. Despite my demeanour today, I will fully enjoy continuing to hold Ministers and the system to account.

On that point, Minister, the Committee considered the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021, and we agree and concur that, in order to provide the necessary stimulus for the Northern Ireland economy, it is very important that we maintain the rates holiday and allow it to happen. Freezing the rates as we have done is also appropriate, because we need to send a strong message across the entirety of Northern Ireland about coming out of COVID and how we will manage that.

On behalf of the Committee, we support the order.

**Mr McHugh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement, which I support. This instrument, which is at his disposal, will in many respects help to stimulate the economy here in the North of Ireland. We all know only too well just how things are for businesses and for householders and how people have suffered over the period of the pandemic. For some, it has been very difficult: I am thinking in particular about furloughed workers who, like self-employed people, have had great difficulty in meeting bills and, maybe, something as basic as putting meat on the table. This rates relief, in many respects, is such a help to them. It will help to stimulate the local economy and will, hopefully, encourage all

of us to respond to the Minister's initiative and others that have been taken by the Executive that will come to the fore later in the year, such as the voucher scheme and the Job Start scheme. Those initiatives will complement this decision by the Minister and allow the economy to emerge from the depressive state in which it has found itself. I look forward to all that improving in every respect. Arís eile, gabhaim mo mhíle buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. Again, I thank the Minister for his statement.

**Mr O'Toole:** Before I begin, I offer my best wishes and those of my party to my colleague the Chairperson of the Finance Committee and his family as he proceeds, hopefully, not to a completely quieter life. He will have more time to focus on all the important issues that we are debating in Committee.

The regional rates order for 2021-22, which my party supports, is exactly the same as the one that we approved for last year. I want to make a couple of remarks about it today. Given where we are with our economy as we come out of COVID, it is important for our fiscal position going forward.

As the Minister said, the poundage levels for domestic and non-domestic rates are unchanged because we have chosen to freeze them for a further year. Given the severity of the economic conditions that we have faced, we agree that that is the right policy response. As well as continuing to freeze the rates, the Finance Minister has prolonged a full rates holiday for businesses in the sectors most acutely affected by COVID-19, in particular the hospitality and tourism sector.

The Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, which advises the Minister, has said that revenues have fallen in the past year by more than three quarters. That totally unprecedented collapse in income came about as a result of our imposing draconian restrictions, and that is why, in a sense, the rates holiday that we are enacting today, following on from the one that we have had over the past year, is a completely understandable, justifiable and welcome intervention for dealing with that. We hope that the easing of restrictions continues, allowing our economy to re-emerge.

Even as the economy returns and all economic forecasters predict growth in 2021, we do not know exactly how that recovery will map out across our economy, nor do we know how many jobs will be permanently lost when the furlough scheme is fully wound up later this year. The most recent data published by the UK Government shows that just under 100,000

workers were on furlough in Northern Ireland at the end of March. Thankfully, that number will have changed a bit since the economy has started to reopen. Even as it reopens, however, we do not know precisely how many jobs will be permanently lost and how many businesses will, sadly, fail, and I am afraid that some will fail. Nor do we yet know the longer-term structural shifts that may be taking place in economic activity not just here but around the world, following the pandemic. We know that fewer office workers will need to be at their desk Monday to Friday from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, but we do not yet know exactly how many fewer people will be there. Critically, we also do not know what the knock-on impact will be on city centres, which currently rely on office footfall to sustain retail and hospitality during the working week. We do not know any of those things, but we know that we will still rely on the regional rate as a significant source of revenue for public services here.

The Minister said that, across the Executive and local government, the total amount of revenue raised from rates is £1.2 billion. From reading the Budget, I know that the rates income this year is forecast to be just under £600 million, but that will be largely offset by the £230 million that is being spent in offering a holiday. Taken together, the non-domestic and domestic regional and district rates are the only major source of revenue that is devolved to these institutions. As I said, this year, the forecast income from the regional rate is just under £600 million, but, in fact, a little over half of that sum will be raised owing to the holiday, with which we agree, being extended by the Finance Minister. However — I say this in a cross-party way as genuinely and sincerely as possible — we will have to face up to the difficult truth that, as we approach fiscal year 2022-23, having forgone about 40% or thereabouts — the Minister can correct me if he thinks that that number is wrong — of our regional rate income for two full years, there must be some level of risk attached to that revenue from 2022 onwards. To be clear, over the past two years that was necessary and essential, and we all agree with it. I am not in any way casting aspersions on the policy, but we have effectively forgone about 40% of the regional rate strand of income, which is one of the very few areas from which the Executive can derive an income. That means that we will have to think hard about what happens next year. This time next year, depending on politics but if things go to plan, we will all, I am afraid, be just a few weeks away from an election when the next regional rates order comes forward. I am not casting aspersions on any of us as politicians, but those will be tough decisions for

politicians of all parties to make in the mouth of an election.

That is before you add in the fact that the full impact of the Reval2020 exercise has not yet been experienced by most businesses as a result of the holidays and freezes of the past two years. The broad uncertainty facing all tax systems everywhere in the developed world based on commercial property valuation is because, as of right now, we simply do not know what the medium- and long-term impact of COVID-19 on commercial property values will be. We just do not know how completely COVID will transform how we work, shop and socialise.

### 12.15 pm

All of that is to say in a genuine, sincere, cross-party way that it is urgent that either or both the fiscal council or fiscal commission being set up by the Minister take a long, hard look at the operation of our rates system as they look at our broader fiscal position. As I and my party have said, it needs to be part of a broader look at our economic performance in conjunction with our fiscal challenges. We have had a lot of debate about the fact that a disproportionate amount of the small strand of income that we are able to generate here comes from non-domestic rates. It is really important that, as we look at our fiscal options and at our economy, we make sure that it is not operating, in effect, in an anachronistic way, given the transformation that, we know, we will face in how we work, shop and socialise.

Given the state of our public services, especially the health service, and, as I have said, the highly limited fiscal tools available to us, we simply cannot drift into this time next year without an urgent and fundamental look at our regional rates model. We cannot afford to risk half a billion pounds in regional rates income and, as the Minister said, over a billion pounds from regional and district rates income for public services because we cannot face confronting the difficult challenges.

In supporting today's regional rates order, I simply set it out that we should all be cognisant of the profound issues that we will face as we come out of COVID and deal with unwinding some of the freezes and holidays that we have all, rightly, supported over the past 15 months.

**Mr Catney:** I welcome the fact that there is a zero increase in the regional rate for another year. The economic uncertainty caused by the pandemic may have some light at the end of

the tunnel. We have seen footage across the news of long queues for businesses that have been able to reopen. That has to be welcomed, as long as people remain as safe as they can. As a former business owner, I empathise with the feelings of uncertainty, pain and fear that have been felt by most of our business community throughout the pandemic, and it is right that we should do all that we can to support them in this time of need.

I thank the Minister and all the officials who have worked in the Department to achieve a zero rate increase. The Minister and the Department suggested that councils should make the same decision, and I know that some have. Clearer advice, support and direction were needed to help councils to achieve the zero rate rise.

Coming out of the pandemic and out of this unprecedented time of economic turmoil gives us an opportunity to look at how we tax our businesses. Business taxation must be done in a way that supports business owners to be employers, particularly as the full scale of job losses has been masked by the furlough scheme. It must not inhibit entrepreneurial ventures and must support those who take a chance and put their resources into their dream of owning their own business and play such an important and active role in our economy.

We had issues with our economy long before the pandemic or even Brexit. We had to boost our historically low productivity and move away from low-skilled, low-paying jobs to give our citizens a brighter future and brighter prospects at home. Rates and taxation are only one part of the equation, but they are an important one. If we do not get it right this time, it can hinder what we do in other areas.

**Mr Muir:** I will be brief, reflecting custom and practice on the subject in previous years. First, I echo the comments about Steve Aiken. He will not be going far, but I wish him best wishes for the future.

The Alliance Party welcomes the action taken thus far in freezing the regional rate and the reliefs that have been offered to certain sectors and those for the last four months of the last financial year. However, as Matthew O'Toole outlined, there are issues in relation to the rating system in Northern Ireland. We face a real cliff edge at the end of this financial year and moving into 2022-23. As part of that, we desperately need an independent review of the rating system, particularly the non-domestic rating system, which is a particular concern.

A review was undertaken by Land and Property Services (LPS), but there needs to be an independent review similar to that conducted in Scotland in order to get authority and respect from the business community and to reflect the issues that I have picked up from traders who are now able to reopen, thanks to the relaxation of the restrictions. They find it tough to swallow to see online retailers, operating from much smaller premises, paying proportionately less in rates, whereas they, on the high street, face significant bills, potentially from the next financial year. They want a fairer and more equitable playing field, to ensure that they can succeed and grow as businesses. We need that independent review of the non-domestic rating system. That is desperately required, and, if we do not get it, we will have the continuation of a broken system. Some of the changes recommended by LPS may be enacted, but they will not attract that level of respect.

We had Reval2020 last year. When the Assembly returned in January, that was a big focus. That dissipated because of the reliefs that were put in place, and it is still not on the agenda. If we do not have that review of the rating system and go back to the full system from the next financial year, we will have serious issues. Hospitality businesses were crying out with the impact of Reval2020. To hit them with the impact of that, just as they are trying to get back on their feet in the next financial year, would be wrong.

I urge the Minister to consider that.

**Mr Murphy:** I thank all who have contributed to the debate. As I stated, the Rates (Regional Rates) Order 2021 gives effect to decisions that were made as part of the Executive's 2021-22 Budget, the wider detail of which was presented to the Assembly on 27 April. The Executive's aim continues to be to strike the correct balance between meeting the needs of ratepayers during what will be a challenging long-term economic environment and ensuring that public finances are sufficient to cover the priorities that we have set ourselves beyond the pandemic. A number of Members correctly highlighted that in their contribution: the economic challenges, as opposed to the revenue that we need to raise in order to support public services. That is the balance to be struck at any time but particularly at such an uncertain time. Faced with the twin effects of Brexit and the pandemic, those things need to be very carefully considered with the information that we have available.

As some Members pointed out, the fiscal commission will be useful this year. We could have done with one many years back, as

Scotland and Wales have. Certainly, in this year, we must use what limited resources we have to support businesses and jobs. This is not just about business people; it is about the jobs that are created and the families that rely on those businesses. We need to supplement as best we can public services, which have already suffered from eight or nine years of Tory austerity. I think that the fiscal commission to look at the overall finances and the fiscal council, which will examine public spend, will be important in the year ahead.

Andrew Muir, who has left the Chamber, raised the issue of the review. The review is not conducted by LPS on its own; it is done in consultation with all the business organisations. A range of the matters raised were taken on board from the previous review. As he said, there is a revaluation exercise and a commitment to do those more frequently. When there is such a gap between them, the revaluations can be quite traumatic and difficult for businesses. The more frequent the revaluations, the less of a shift in what certain businesses pay.

Andrew and others raised the issue of online business.

Of course, particularly during the pandemic, as I said, online became more popular when retail was closed down. However, rates can be assessed only on the size of a property; you cannot assess them on the basis of what business is done. Therefore, actually, the issue that the Member raises is a taxation issue. It would be something else if the Government in London decided to place more tax on online businesses in order to try to create some balance between what online and high-street retailers pay in property tax. However, rates and the issues that we are debating can only take account of the physical size of a property and apply a tax according to that size. Of course, there are reliefs built in as well, but the issue that the Member raises is definitely a taxation issue. We will continue to talk to the Treasury about that.

In conclusion, I trust that Members will show the necessary support for the order. I particularly thank the Committee Chair — as others have, I wish him well in whatever lies ahead for him — the Committee itself and the Committee staff for their work on the order. I look forward to working with them on the wider rating issues over the remainder of the mandate.

**Mr Speaker:** I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 be affirmed.*

**Mr Speaker:** I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

## Private Members' Business

### Climate Change Bill: Second Stage

**Ms Bailey:** I beg to move

*That the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill [NIA 19/17-22] be agreed.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has not allocated a time limit to this debate.

**Ms Bailey:** Before I begin, I will also take this opportunity to wish Mr Aiken good luck. I am delighted that he is remaining as an MLA because he is always a very positive person to work with. I wish him well.

The Bill sets a framework for climate change adaptation and mitigation in Northern Ireland. Since 2008, climate change legislation has been slowly but steadily emerging around the world.

Although we no longer have the opportunity to be global leaders by bringing forward the legislation, our hope is that the Bill will serve to finally enable Northern Ireland to play its part in tackling the biggest issue of our time: climate breakdown.

**12.30 pm**

The scientific consensus is that climate change is real, is a global issue and requires a global-to-local response. The work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is probably the largest and most rigorous examination of a scientific issue in the history of the world. The most recent IPCC report concluded that the "continued emission of greenhouse gases" will increase:

*"the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems."*

Those impacts include irreparably degrading our natural environment, driving species to extinction, worsening chronic and contagious disease, worsening food and water shortages, increasing the risk of pandemics and aggravating mass displacement.

The UN estimates that there could be anywhere between 25 million and one billion environmental migrants by 2050. Northern Ireland needs strong climate legislation in order to ensure that we do our part to tackle the

global, social and ecological crises that are inherent in climate breakdown. As global citizens and citizens of a developed country and as politicians and the generation responsible for leaving behind a liveable world for our children and young people, we have a responsibility to act. We cannot continue to lag behind and let others do the hard work for us.

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

**Ms Bailey:** Certainly.

**Mr Allister:** The Member made reference to what the UN has been saying. What does she say to the fact that, in 1982, which is almost 40 years ago, the executive director of the UN environment programme said that, by the turn of the century, we would face:

*"an environmental catastrophe which will witness devastation as complete, as irreversible, as any nuclear holocaust."*

It was wrong then. Why should we believe that it is right now?

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I am certainly not a climate denier or a climate sceptic. I will act on all the work that comes from international bodies and from states across the world in trying to deal with the issue. Even in Northern Ireland, we are seeing the impacts of it, particularly in our weather patterns. I do not think that any of that should be ignored.

The legislation is long overdue. Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK and Ireland with no legally binding greenhouse gas reduction targets. We know that Northern Ireland has an unfortunate track record of poor performance on climate. Our emissions are not falling at anywhere the same rate as those in the rest of the UK. They are 20% here compared with the UK average of 43%. We have actually increased our share of total UK emissions. The role of climate legislation in driving down greenhouse gas emissions cannot be overstated. The commitment to introduce a climate change Act for Northern Ireland was a cornerstone of the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement. NDNA stated:

*"The Executive will introduce legislation and targets for reducing carbon emissions in line with the Paris Climate Change Accord."*

It also stated:

*"The Executive should bring forward a Climate Change Act to give environmental targets a strong legal underpinning."*

In February 2020, the Assembly voted to declare a climate emergency and called on the Executive to fulfil the climate action and environmental commitments set out in NDNA. In July 2020, the Assembly passed a motion calling for the urgent introduction of a climate change Act for Northern Ireland within three months. In response to the July motion, the Minister made it clear that he had no intention of bringing forward urgent climate change legislation. He said that the time frame was "impossible to achieve" and that we were "ridiculous" to ask for it. It was in that context of persistent ministerial inaction that a private Member's Bill became the only option for bringing climate change legislation before the Assembly before the end of the current political mandate. Time is no longer on our side. We need to move far, and we need to move fast. Climate mitigation will impact on all aspects of people's lives.

The key components of a just transition are citizen participation and democratic decision-making. Partnership and participation are inherent to the Bill. It was co-developed by a partnership of civil society, legal and scientific academic experts and MLAs. It originates from the Climate Coalition Northern Ireland (CCNI), which is Northern Ireland's largest collaborative body on climate action and has a membership of 390,000. This will continue to be a collaborative process as the Bill makes its way through the various legislative stages to become law. It must be collaborative. I look forward to taking sectoral evidence, through the AERA Committee, and working with the Committee, MLAs, political parties, stakeholders and civic society to strengthen and advance the Bill.

Before I turn to the detail of the Bill, it may be helpful to set out briefly what the Bill does and does not do, and the rationale for that. This is primary legislation, so it is not prescriptive. It is a framework Bill that sets out the legislative basis upon which to build future climate policy. It does not assign sectoral-specific targets or dictate departmental policy. The Bill sets out a sustainable pathway to decarbonisation for Northern Ireland, ensuring transparency and democratic oversight at every stage and guaranteeing independent monitoring so that the democratic oversight can be effective.

The Bill is divided into three Parts. It is made up of 17 clauses and two schedules. In broad terms, it does the following. First, it declares a

climate emergency as the basis for government action to halt human-induced global warming. Secondly, it mandates that the Executive, within three years of Royal Assent, prepare five-yearly climate action plans containing annual targets, carbon budgets, nitrogen budgets and sectoral plans. Thirdly, the Bill establishes the Northern Ireland climate commissioner and climate office to independently oversee the implementation of the Bill and review its working, making recommendations as required to achieve the overriding climate objective. Lastly, the Bill guarantees non-regression in Northern Ireland law from existing climate and environmental protections contained in EU law as it applied before the end of the Brexit transition period. Of course, this is already provided for in the withdrawal Act.

The Bill is broadly broken down as follows. Clause 1 provides for the declaration of a climate emergency from the date of Royal Assent. In declaring a climate emergency, we acknowledge that climate change exists and that the measures taken to this point have not been enough to address it. We recognise the role that Governments have in introducing measures that will halt climate change. The climate emergency will outlive successive Assembly terms. The annulment of the emergency requires Assembly approval and must be based on verifiable proof from a relevant body that the global temperature threshold defined in the Paris agreement or any subsequent agreement has been met. The Assembly can redeclare a climate emergency at any point.

Clause 2 relates to the creation of climate action plans, which are policy documents that detail the steps that will be taken to address the challenges of climate change in Northern Ireland. The plans must be approved by the Assembly and must achieve the overriding climate objective: the establishment in Northern Ireland of a net zero carbon, climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable economy by 2045. This target of 2045 is ambitious but achievable, and it reflects the general legislative trend towards strong climate legislation and the urgency to do as much as possible as quickly as possible. The net zero year may be altered by order of the Executive but cannot be amended to a year after 2045. Each climate action plan will be prepared by the Executive Office and laid before the Assembly for its approval. The first plan must be laid within three years of the Bill being enacted and every five years thereafter. Clause 2 also defines aspects of the "overriding climate objective", such as net zero and climate resilience. It lists the seven

greenhouse gases that must be included in the net zero target.

Clause 3 states that climate action plans will be made up of "targets" and "measures". Targets will be for greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity, water quality and soil quality. That is because climate change is caused by greenhouse gas emissions but manifests itself in declining water and soil quality, and biodiversity. Any climate action plan must, therefore, consider those areas as key performance indicators. Measures look at how targets will be implemented. Measures include carbon budgets, nitrogen budgets and sectoral plans across the Northern Ireland economy.

The clause sets out what must be taken into account when setting targets. Targets are set after obtaining advice from the relevant expert body, and certain things must be taken into account. Those include international law and the impact that a target will have on the environment, public health and well-being in Northern Ireland's specific economic and social circumstances. That is key to ensuring that targets are fair and do not disproportionately impact on one group while ensuring that the Bill is effective and achieves its overriding climate objective.

Other provisions in clause 3 include details of what must be taken into account in carbon and nitrogen budgets, including the requirement to take transboundary impacts into account; requirements for DAERA to create a scheme to track carbon usage and its purchase of carbon units; the requirement to take transboundary elements into account; details of which sectors must be included in sectoral plans; and the just transition principles to which those plans must be subject. The inclusion of just transition principles is an important part of ensuring that the change to a net zero carbon society will mean a better and fairer society for all.

The clause states:

*"sectoral plans shall also—*  
*(a) support jobs and growth of jobs that are climate resilient and environmentally and socially sustainable;*  
*(b) support net-zero carbon investment and infrastructure;*  
*(c) create work which is high-value, fair and sustainable;*  
*(d) reduce inequality as far as possible;*  
*(e) reduce, with a view to eliminating, poverty and social deprivation".*

Clause 4 provides for implementation reports to be laid before the Assembly each year for the

duration of the climate action plan. It sets out how the reports should be set out and what they should contain. That includes whether the annual target was met; reasons for failure to meet targets; progress on each sectoral policy and the likelihood of full policy implementation; and the likelihood of the overriding climate objective being achieved.

Part 2 relates to the Northern Ireland climate office and the Northern Ireland climate commissioner. Clauses 5 to 10 and schedules 1 and 2 establish the Northern Ireland climate office and the Northern Ireland climate commissioner, and outline the climate commissioner's powers and functions. The climate commissioner will provide independent scrutiny and oversight of the Act. Similar to the Public Services Ombudsman, the climate commissioner will not be under the direction of any Department or Minister, the Assembly, the Assembly Commission or any local authority. The manner of appointment of the climate commissioner by the Crown on nomination by the Assembly is to allow maximum independence from government.

The climate commissioner will not have enforcement powers, but, similarly to independent climate bodies in other jurisdictions, will have the power to make recommendations and raise issues that the Executive will be mandated to address.

The climate commissioner will have two main functions: to monitor the implementation of the climate action plans and make annual reports to the Assembly on the issue; and to produce, at least once an Assembly term, an independent review report on the functioning and effectiveness of the Act, recommending any amendments that are considered necessary to achieve the overriding climate objective. Those functions will create an important statutory discourse that will allow climate action plans to be flexibly rooted in independent science.

Clause 11 concerns the alteration of climate action plans following the climate commissioner's annual report.

**12.45 pm**

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

**Ms Bailey:** I certainly will.

**Mr Allister:** Before the Member leaves Part 2, will she give some explanation to the House of what clause 6(8) means? Clause 6(8) states:

*"The Climate Commissioner may do anything (including acquire or dispose of property or rights) which is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive or incidental to, the discharge of the functions of the Climate Commissioner."*

What rights is it anticipated that the climate commissioner could dispose of under clause 6(8)?

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Member for his intervention. It is not envisaged in the Bill that the climate commissioner will have any enforcement powers; it is simply a monitoring and reporting function to assess how the legislation is progressing.

I have lost my place, Mr Speaker, so I will start again on clause 11. Clause 11 relates to the alteration of climate action plans following the climate commissioner's annual report. Following the laying of the annual report by the climate commissioner, the Executive Office must prepare its response — this may address the Member's point — including any proposed alterations to targets or measures. In altering the climate action plan, the Executive Office must not directly or indirectly lower targets or standards. Alterations must be approved by the Assembly. In that and in its other processes, the Bill outperforms other climate legislation around the world because it enshrines democracy and transparency in law.

Democracy is key to a just transition. Society will shift and change, and conversations about how that happens cannot be had in a room with the doors closed. Every aspect of this just transition will be debated openly and transparently, ensuring democratic oversight and engagement.

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** I thank the Member for giving way. Is that why you engaged in a public consultation process? Did you engage in a public consultation process? If you did, can you make us aware of it?

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Minister for his comments. I would be a bit surprised if he were not aware that a private Member's Bill is not mandated to go out to public consultation. There will be evidence sessions on the Bill with all stakeholders at Committee Stage, if it passes Second Stage today.

Clause 12 provides a duty that there must be no regression from the environmental standards that were in place when Northern Ireland left

the EU. That is already a condition of the withdrawal agreement. Moreover, nothing in the Bill will override an Act of Parliament.

Back in July, Minister Poots said that we should not use language such as "emergency" or "crisis", but the science does not lie. The climate crisis is already here. Higher temperatures are causing drought and widespread crop failures. Wildfires, storms in the north Atlantic, rising tides and flooding are part of long-term trends. As the Arctic warms, permafrost melts, releasing even more carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere. We are moving ever closer to the point at which climate change cannot be managed and controlled by humans.

Every tiny incremental temperature rise counts. The more heat that gets added to the earth's climate system, the more out of balance natural systems will get. The more out of balance natural systems get, the more destruction and suffering we will see. We are already sitting at 1.3°C of warming. At 1.5°C of warming, we will push past the turning point, and climate change impacts will go from destructive to catastrophic. At 2°C of warming, we see simultaneous global crop failure, representing a threat to global food security. In a modest mitigation scenario, we will hit 2°C of warming as early as 2038. At 3°C of warming, which, scientists believe, looks increasingly likely between 2050 and 2100, we will have surpassed a tipping point from which there is no return, with humans powerless to intervene as planetary temperatures soar. Warming of 3°C risks seeing the almost total loss of the Amazon rainforest, with drought and fires turning trees back into carbon dioxide as they burn or rot and decompose. The Met Office has warned that we could see 4°C of warming by 2060 without immediate action on emissions. Climate scientist Kevin Anderson said that 4°C of warming would be:

*"incompatible with any reasonable characterisation of an organised, equitable and civilised global community."*

If that is not an emergency, what is?

Climate change, like COVID-19, requires a global-to-local response and long-term thinking guided by science and the need to protect the most vulnerable. It requires the political will to make fundamental changes to the way we live our lives in order to respond to what is an existential threat to humanity and all life on earth. The Bill will provide a legal framework to decarbonise the economy in a way that tackles inequality and enhances the lives of ordinary people, our workers and our communities. The

transition to a green economy must be underpinned by values of social justice and the principle that no one gets left behind.

Finally, I pay tribute to all the activists and environmentalists who have got us to this point today and to all our children and young people who took part in the Fridays for Future strikes in Belfast and further afield for so long and had the vision and determination to demand more of us on climate breakdown. You showed us what democracy looks like, and we continue in that spirit in the Bill. I pay tribute to Climate Coalition Northern Ireland, whose resolve to see climate change legislation has resulted in the Bill that we have before us today. To have a Climate Change Bill debated in the Chamber is a first for Northern Ireland, and we should not forget that. I look forward to the debate and commend the Bill to the House.

**Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** The Bill has a number of co-sponsors, with the main sponsor being Clare Bailey. The Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs heard from Ms Bailey and other witnesses at our meeting on 29 April. Ms Bailey is also a member of our Committee, as are two other co-sponsors, namely Philip McGuigan and John Blair.

Ms Bailey gave evidence to the Committee as a witness and not as an MLA. She was accompanied by Dr Amanda Slevin, Mr Anurag Deb and Mr Philip Carson, all of whom have also been heavily involved in drafting the Bill. Ms Bailey told the Committee that the Bill originated with the Climate Coalition, which is a network organisation representing more than 400,000 people across the region. It was a priority of that organisation to develop an ambitious climate change Bill based on the best available science and for it to be introduced as a matter of urgency.

Let me give you some background to the Committee's work on climate change overall. The AERA Committee brought a motion to the Assembly on 21 July 2020 calling for the introduction of a climate change Act. That motion was endorsed by the Assembly. Since then, we have heard on a number of occasions from DAERA officials about the Minister's plans to produce an Executive climate change Bill. We have also heard about the links to the green growth environment framework, about which the Committee has been unable to get definite detail. During the sessions, officials told us about DAERA's consultation on a climate change Bill, outlined that the issue had risen up

the agenda and gave a preliminary policy position on what might be in it.

The DAERA proposal was to be based on a target of an 82% reduction in greenhouse gases by 2050. That target is based on advice from the UK Climate Change Committee (CCC). The AERA Committee also heard from the CCC —.

**Dr Aiken:** Will the Chairman give way?

**Mr McAleer:** Sorry, yes.

**Dr Aiken:** For clarification, that is "at least an 82% reduction" in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, from the Climate Change Committee report.

**Mr McAleer:** Yes, Mr Aiken, that is correct: at least 82%.

We had an interesting exchange with the chairperson of the CCC and some of his board's members, and we explored the advice that has been adopted by DAERA regarding the 82% reduction by 2050 for this jurisdiction. The target forms a central point of difference between the Bill before us today and the Bill that, DAERA officials indicated, was likely to come to the Assembly. I have no doubt that this target will be one of the most debated aspects of the Bill during its legislative passage. It already causes considerable debate and discussion in the wider community, particularly among the farming sector. That is to be welcomed. We are glad to see that the issue has risen up the agenda and that people, including the farming and rural communities, are discussing climate change. I assure you that, if the Bill passes the Second Stage and comes back to the Committee, we will allow plenty of time for the views of the agri-food and all those sectors to be heard and debated.

The Bill has a number of aims, which Ms Bailey has outlined. It is useful to go over them again. The Committee heard that it is a framework Bill. It is not prescriptive but sets out a pathway to net zero while ensuring transparency and democratic oversight. It begins by declaring a climate emergency and establishes that as the mandate for mitigation and adaptation. It also sets out how the climate emergency can be annulled. It sets the target of reaching net zero by 2045 and mandates the Executive, within three years of the Bill being passed, to prepare five-year climate action plans to reach that target.

The action plans are made up of two parts: targets and measures. Measures will look at carbon and nitrogen budgets and sectoral plans across a range of areas such as power generation and supply; transport, including shipping and aviation; residential and public buildings; waste management; infrastructure; land use; land-use change; and agriculture. The targets have provisions in place to protect biodiversity, water and soil quality and will include nitrogen budgets. The targets are included because the quality of those things is so closely linked to climate change.

The Bill also has provisions to take trans-boundary impacts into account to track carbon usage etc. Importantly, the Bill also has provisions for a just transition, which have been included to ensure that the change to net zero will mean a fairer and better society for all of us. The Bill also provides for the establishment of a climate commissioner and climate office and for non-regression of our law from existing climate and environmental protections set out in EU law, as it applied before the end of the —.

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

**Mr McAleer:** Yes.

**Mr Poots:** Can you stand over that statement of society being "fairer for all"? The Climate Change Committee indicates a 50% reduction in dairy and a 50% reduction in beef, for example. If that happens, it will migrate what is left of that sector onto the lowlands. In that case, the hill farmers that you have referred to very often will suffer most, and they will not get fairness and equity with the Bill that is being promoted by the private Member.

**Mr McAleer:** I thank the Member for his intervention. Regarding fairness and justness, Ms Bailey outlined that the climate action plans that are part of the proposed Bill, which will come before the Assembly every five years, will come about only through extensive and detailed public consultation with farmers and rural stakeholders. We want the climate action plans to be just, manageable and deliverable, and we certainly do not want them to inhibit or decimate farming here in the North in any way. I restate that we have plans, from now until 16 December, to scrutinise the draft framework legislation rigorously. It is a framework that will effectively be filled out by secondary legislation, so no surprises will come down the line for farmers. There will be a consultation exercise, and the Bill will be rigorously debated. We will hear evidence from Lord Deben and the UK Climate Change Committee, but we will also

hear evidence from other experts from Ireland — from the Teagasc — and internationally to tease all of this out as we move through the scrutiny process.

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

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

**Mr McAleer:** He asked first. You can go next.

**1.00 pm**

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Member for giving way and for his response to the Minister. Does the Member agree with me that, as was stated even by the Member who moved the Bill, that, regardless of what the CCC said in its letter, this framework Bill does not actually assign any sectoral-specific targets or interfere with departmental policy?

**Mr McAleer:** The Member is correct: this framework Bill does not stipulate that at all. As I say, the climate action plans will be five-yearly climate action plans. There has to be a 16-week consultation to sign off on those climate action plans. They have to be signed off by the Executive and the Assembly following rigorous consultation with the farming community and all the other stakeholders.

**Mr Allister:** I hear what the Member says, but has he read clause 11(2)(e), which is very clear:

*"the Executive Office must not propose any alteration which has the effect, whether directly or indirectly, of lowering any target under section 3(2) of this Act from the level approved by the Assembly under section 2(3)"?*

How can he say that there is always the option to look again? There is no option in the Bill to look again; none whatsoever. It is set in stone.

**Mr McAleer:** This is a Bill of the Assembly. It is under the ownership of the Assembly. As I say, at the moment, it is framework legislation. Everyone will have their say as it is fleshed out, including Mr Allister, who will no doubt have plenty to say, because he has plenty to say at other times.

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

Going back to where we were, the Committee explored these principles with Ms Bailey and

other witnesses. I will outline some of the thoughts of the Committee. It is fair to say that the Committee spent considerable time exploring the implications of the 100% net zero target by 2045. As I noted earlier, many, particularly in the agri-food sector, have real concerns with this target because of advice from the CCC that such a target would mean radical change for the farming sector. The CCC has:

*"recommended that any climate legislation for"*

here should

*"include a target to reduce all greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by at least 82% by 2050".*

That is the point on which Mr Aiken sought clarity just a moment ago. It is important to emphasise that the CCC uses the phrase "at least 82% by 2050", because it has been clear that it sees its recommendation as a minimum target. The CCC analysis is based on our position as a strong agri-food exporter to Britain, combined with our:

*"more limited capabilities to use 'engineered' greenhouse gas removal technologies".*

This means that we are:

*"likely to remain a small net source of greenhouse gas emissions – almost entirely from agriculture".*

The CCC further stated:

*"those residual emissions should be offset by actions in"*

Britain.

At the request of DAERA, further advice from the CCC was obtained. It has also been considered by the Committee. That advice is available on our website for anyone who is interested. The CCC advice suggests:

*"Going further to reach Net Zero in 2050 would likely require either (or both) of ...*

*A larger reduction in output from"*

our

*"livestock sector compared to"*

other regions and more farming land released for carbon capture. The CCC has created various scenarios to get us to net zero, suggesting:

*"Even our most stretching Tailwinds scenario – which entails a 50% fall in meat and dairy production"*

here

*"by 2050 and significantly greater levels of tree planting on the land released – is not enough to get"*

this jurisdiction

*"to Net Zero emissions in 2050."*

There is a fear among the agriculture sector that it could be disproportionately impacted on by the Bill. That impact would extend beyond farming into the processing and manufacturing sectors. It is also fair to say that the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), in particular, is very concerned about the impact of the Bill. There are real concerns for some of our farming communities. Others fear that a cut in livestock numbers here could lead to food being imported from other countries that do not produce it to the same high standards as we do. The Committee explored this in some detail. We are aware that we have a population of 1.8 million and produce sufficient food, mostly dairy and meat, for 10 million people. We heard from witnesses that the UK consumes double the recommended amount of animal-based protein and that reducing that can be beneficial for public health. The dietary and lifestyle changes that will be required to meet the target were explored.

Ms Bailey said that she and her colleagues had met some of the farming sector bodies and that, after listening to their concerns, she wished to put on the record that there is nothing in the Bill that will harm the agriculture sector. She noted that the Bill does not mandate any immediate changes to the agriculture sector, nor is it prescriptive. There are no specific targets allocated to individual sectors, and, because some sectors, such as transport and energy, are ready to move immediately and quickly, agriculture may have a more gradual transition. It was also pointed out that the CCC had explored very few pathways for change that include future developments in low-carbon farming measures.

The witnesses further noted that the assumption that we cannot reach net zero by

2045 has not been fully investigated, and they provided examples of what can be done. Moreover, what is happening in Wales and Scotland should be noted. Initially, the CCC recommended to Wales a target of 92% to net zero. That was based on the importance of livestock to the agriculture sector. Wales has taken that on board and moved beyond it. The Committee took that discussion further by considering the impact of climate change on farming, particularly the economic costs of severe weather. One witness referred to research that indicated that climate change has cost the Scottish industry around £161 million and that, on a global basis, climate change has reduced productivity by 21% since the 1960s.

The Committee also considered the transboundary provisions in the Bill, and an important aspect of those is that we share a land border with another jurisdiction on this island. In practical terms, a farmer in the border regions might have some land on either side of the land borders. The difficulties that might be created, particularly as the targets in the Bill are different from those in the South, were discussed.

The consultation with various sectors was discussed. We heard that the Climate Coalition, which had been working with Ms Bailey on drafting a Bill, is the largest civic society network for climate change here, with its member organisations representing over 400,000 people. It did intensive consultation with its members throughout the development of the Bill. There has also been engagement with key stakeholders, including NIAPA, Farmers for Action, departmental officials and energy companies. There are plans for further consultation as the Bill progresses. The Committee was made aware that the UFU strongly indicated that it has major concerns with the Bill. I noted that the Committee explored in great detail the implications of reaching a climate change target by 2050. I will not go over that again.

The next matter discussed by the Committee was the principle of a just transition. We heard that that principle is deeply embedded in the Bill. The witnesses provided further detail about what it means by reference to a paper from the COP26 Universities Network. They also outlined the dimensions of social justice, procedural justice, distributive justice, recognition justice and restorative justice. The aim to reduce inequality, eliminate poverty and social deprivation, to support high net zero carbon investment and infrastructure and to create work that is high-value, fair and sustainable is part of the Bill.

In exploring that principle, food security was discussed. Witnesses noted that perhaps the biggest threat to food security is climate change and that it will force change in how we maintain capacity in the land to produce food in the longer term. We discussed the independent environmental protection agency, the IEPA, and its crossover, including possible joint working, with the climate change commissioner.

The commissioner will have two main functions. The first will be to report on the implementation of climate action plans for the duration of those plans. The second function will be to report on the effectiveness of the Bill once it is enacted and to recommend any changes in order to ensure that the net zero target is achieved. The commissioner will provide the Assembly and its Committees with the evidence on what is going right, what is going wrong and what can be improved.

It is vital that the legislation is kept under review. That review should take account of developments in science and technology and in our understanding of how climate change works and can be abated. To that end, it is envisaged that the commissioner will make recommendations on how we can improve the methods that we use to achieve net zero. We noted that the commissioner will not have enforcement powers. The Committee noted proposals that the remit of the Office of Environmental Protection (OEP) be extended to here with the approval of the Assembly in order to include enforcement powers relating to climate change.

I outlined some of the Committee's exploration of the principles of the Bill. In summary, the issue that the Committee paid most attention to was the impact on the agri-food industry of the 100% net zero by 2045 target. Some of our Committee members are very concerned about this aspect. Most are being lobbied very hard on this target, as I have been. However, overall, the Bill was broadly welcomed by the AERA Committee, and, if it receives Assembly approval today, we will look forward to scrutinising it in further detail at Committee Stage. That concludes what I have to say as Chair of the AERA Committee.

I want to comment in my capacity as the Sinn Féin spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs. In supporting the Bill, we want to assure farmers and those involved in the agri-food industry that we fully recognise the vital role that agriculture plays by producing safe and secure food, sustaining rural communities and underpinning over 100,000 jobs in the North. All of us who have been through the COVID

pandemic during the last year appreciate the vital role played by farmers and the agri-food processing industry in keeping our food supplies moving during very difficult and challenging times.

We also recognise the huge environmental contribution that our farmers, as custodians of the countryside, make to the preservation of biodiversity, water quality and animal health standards. Farmers, from experience, know that they are in the front line of extreme weather events brought about by climate change. We need look no further than my constituency of West Tyrone, where we had severe landslides in the Sperrins four years ago. Indeed, in recent weeks, the Minister paid a very welcome visit there. The landslides devastated farms, livestock and properties. With the earth heating up and sea levels rising, unless we take action, these events will become more common.

Across the world, 197 countries have signed up to the Paris climate change agreement. These countries have pledged to take steps to keep the global temperature rise to less than 2°C above pre-industrial levels. To fulfil this, Britain — Scotland, England and Wales — and the South of Ireland have passed climate change Acts that commit them to reducing their greenhouse gas emissions and becoming carbon neutral in the next 24 to 29 years. The North is the only part of these islands that does not have a climate change Act, and this sends out the wrong message to the international world about our commitment to sustainable and environmental practices. We have a very strong and good message to send to the rest of the world, and that will be undermined if we do not commit to ambitious and deliverable climate change targets. If the North does not adopt a climate change Act in accordance with the Paris agreement, it could reduce our ability to access international markets for our produce. This would be particularly pronounced as the South of Ireland and the other regions of these islands have committed to climate neutrality by 2045 to 2050. During the conversation that I had with Lord Deben of the UK CCC, he made the point that, if we do not agree to sign up to a climate change Act, we will be punished by the rest of the world. That could also create unforeseen problems, as virtually all our agri-food and our dairy products are processed in both parts of the island and are deemed mixed origin.

We know that farmers have concerns about the implications of this Private Member's Bill. We all will have received lobbies and presentations about this legitimate concern. On Friday, with my Sinn Féin colleagues, I met a number of leading agri-food stakeholders and listened to

their concerns. It is important that we take on board these legitimate concerns as we go forward to scrutinise the clauses. We must ensure that these stakeholders not only have their voices heard but get involved in the process of trying to shape the Bill as we move ahead through the next six months of rigorous scrutiny.

The Bill, as previously said, is a framework. It proposes a number of structures, a climate change office, a commissioner and climate change plans. I re-emphasise that these plans will be co-designed with rural stakeholders and will be subject to public consultation before they are agreed by the Executive and the Assembly. There will be a lot of the rigorous scrutiny and involvement that we want to see being part of the Bill.

The Bill does not contain sanction powers. Any plans will have to take account of the fiscal, social and economic impacts here in the North. In addition, the farming sector is not being asked to make any changes for the next three years.

### 1.15 pm

I underline again the commitment of my party and, indeed, the Committee to scrutinise the Bill rigorously over the next six or seven months. We have identified a range of experts. It will be debated and discussed at length by the Agriculture Committee. The Assembly will come back to it on more than one occasion. There will be public consultation exercises before the Bill becomes law. The Committee agreed to that range of stakeholders, experts and round-table events, as well as public consultation using Citizen Space for members of the public to have their say as the Bill unfolds and develops.

What is being asked of farmers in the private Member's Bill is that, over the next 24 years, they will take steps to balance out the amount of greenhouse gases that their farms produce with what they absorb or sequester. We have looked at other regions for evidence of how that may be achieved. Rather than decimating herds and farm businesses, we believe that reducing greenhouse gas emissions can be achieved through production efficiency, which also leads to profitability. Indeed, experts from Teagasc in the South of Ireland have identified actions such as extending the grazing season, mixed-grass swards, changing to protected urea fertiliser, reducing losses from slurry and substituting clover for chemical fertiliser that can help to reduce emissions while cutting

costs; indeed, last year, farmers in the South of Ireland were able to reduce emissions by 6%.

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Member for giving way. I concur totally with his comments about the importance of the farming and rural community's participation in shaping the Bill. Much will be made and said today about specific lines in the CCC's letter to the Minister or the Committee. Less will be said about other more positive lines and paragraphs in that letter. In its 'Sixth Carbon Budget' report, the CCC says:

*"The [greenhouse gas] impacts of [less-intensive farming or agroecology options] are not included in [the CCC] scenarios due to the lack of robust evidence on the abatement potential".*

Does the Member agree with my reading of that, which is that the CCC's estimates of potential reductions in greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture here are incomplete and are therefore currently underestimates?

**Mr McAleer:** Yes. I agree with what the Member has said. There needs to be more exploration through the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and the Department to look at the abatement potential, because one thing that farmers, North and South, have been saying to us is that they do not feel that the amount of carbon that they sequester has been properly calculated. We need to have that if we are to arrive at a proper assessment to reach net zero.

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for giving way. It is important that we debate that issue fully because we have not had a public consultation. I have to say that it is poor form not to have had that consultation, irrespective of whether it had to be done.

With regard to mixed clover and all the issues that the Member has raised as potential abatements, I accept that and agree that they have potential. However, one of the people who are most involved in this is Dr John Gilliland. There is an invitation for the Member to visit the farm at Dowth, and I have that invitation also. Just this morning, we received a letter from Dr Gilliland expressing concern on the issue. Even the people who are at the cutting edge to which the Member has referred are concerned about the Bill. It will have most impact on the farms that are less productive currently. As the Member knows, the less productive farms are those on the hills.

**Mr McAleer:** Yes. Through the UFU, I have accepted that invitation and look forward to visiting that farm in County Louth — absolutely. I want to pick up on some of those points. We want to hear more of that sort of information and to scrutinise it during the next six months. That is really important. I was looking at DAERA's website to see what mechanisms it has to give farmers some sort of baseline for what they are producing and emitting, and it has the bovine information system (BovIS) calculator. The Department's note states:

*"Reducing greenhouse gas emissions involves understanding the relationship between soils, livestock and environmental farm management, but, fortunately, lower GHG emissions are generally linked to improved production and profitability."*

We must explore as far as possible the on-farm options.

I will get back to what I was saying. There are many experts that we need to hear from, including the UK CCC and Teagasc in the South of Ireland. Teagasc has identified actions that I have mentioned previously. Other advances have been made in areas such as beef genomics and in soil management, which is about getting the pH level right. Reducing crude protein and incorporating specific minerals and even seaweed extracts into cattle diets have been identified as being effective means of reducing emissions. GHG emissions can also be balanced at farm level through environmental actions such as hedgerow and tree planting, the re-wetting of bogs and appropriate nutrient management of soils to maximise their carbon storage potential. As the Minister brings forward his new agriculture and rural policy, it is important that those actions be factored into it.

I restate that all of this will be rigorously scrutinised and teased out by the AERA Committee in partnership with the agri-food sector, climate change experts and, of course, the public through Citizen Space and stakeholder events.

The aim of the Bill is for the agriculture industry to achieve net zero GHG emissions by 2045. We do not believe that agriculture should be scaled back in order to achieve that. We do not want to see production being inhibited or the problem being offloaded to somewhere else, which is known as carbon leakage. We strongly do not believe that the only solution for reaching net zero is to reduce herd sizes and decimate farm businesses. We could not stand over the decimation of farming in Ireland or the exporting

of emissions to other countries. That would be a complete contradiction of our commitment to tackling the global crisis.

To become carbon-neutral in the next 24 years, farmers also need to have a baseline. Farmers need to know where they stand on progress towards carbon neutrality. In fact, many farmers may be more carbon-neutral than they think they are. While researching for today's debate, I noted with interest recent comments by the Irish Farmers' Association's County Kerry chair that many farms are already carbon-neutral. There is a huge onus on DAERA and AFBI to develop an accurate carbon calculator that builds on the BovIS GHG calculator. Farmers need an accurate picture of where they are on the pathway to being carbon-neutral that accurately assesses the huge amount of carbon that is sequestered by hedges, bogs and the grasslands that they manage. The South already has that pathway through its marginal abatement cost curve, which was developed in conjunction with leading national and international experts and scientists and sets out 26 actions that can be taken on-farm to reduce emissions and increase efficiency and profitability. We need to learn from that body of research and, indeed, from the extensive research that has been done in the North and in other regions nationally and internationally. We also need to work with farmers to help them develop the road map.

I cannot underline strongly enough how deeply we appreciate vital role that farm businesses play in our society, and we want to work in partnership with the farming community to support it in putting in place a manageable transition that helps it achieve carbon neutrality.

**Mr Irwin:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. As someone who has spent his working life farming the land, I am all too aware of the need to address global emissions in the agriculture industry and many other industries. I do not speak as someone who ignores the ramifications of global emissions; rather, I want to find the best response to such matters, with the twin interests of the planet and our agri-food sector firmly in mind.

I must state that the threat to farming, food production and the economic stability of Northern Ireland could not be starker when the ramifications of the Bill are considered. Ms Bailey has managed to unite the agri-food sector, ordinary farmers and representative farming organisations against her Bill not because they have some fear or unwillingness to protect and enhance the environment — they

already try to do that — but because such a Bill, if implemented, would do unimaginable harm to Northern Ireland's food production. The threat posed by the Bill must be weighed against the impact of Northern Ireland's global emissions. According to data, our contribution stands at 0.04%. With that figure firmly in mind, it would be pragmatic and sensible to respond to the threat of global warming with measures that do two things: contribute to a lowering of global emissions proportionally; and ensure that Northern Ireland can continue to have a prosperous economy. Ms Bailey's Bill does neither. That is why it must be voted down.

Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, Northern Ireland's agri-food sector has shown itself to be a resilient industry that prides itself in caring for the environment and the livestock that it produces. The Bill and its insistence on reaching net zero by 2045 would require a reduction in the output of Northern Ireland farms that would mean the decimation of Northern Ireland agriculture. That is neither sensible nor good for the environment or the economy.

The Committee heard evidence from Lord Deben on his work on the Climate Change Committee, which has taken a long, detailed, scientific and wide-ranging view of the changes required and has drawn important conclusions that, whilst being a significant challenge, represent a much more achievable road map to the reductions required in line with the broader United Kingdom strategy. The private Member's Bill is simply a hopeful political gamble by the Green Party, which seeks to own any official position targets set by DAERA on the important issues while reducing time frames and, in turn, worryingly, increasing risks for one of Northern Ireland's most important economic sectors.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for giving way. With regard to his last remark about this being some sort of opportunistic attempt by the Green Party to do something, does the Member recognise the cross-party support and involvement in the Bill and the fact that there are co-sponsors from every party in the House, bar his party and the TUV?

**Mr Irwin:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I accept that, but some of those parties are already rowing back from their position. If you had listened carefully to the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee earlier, you would have realised that.

There is much focus on the farming industry, with climate change being considered and much expected of the industry in terms of

emissions reductions. However, it is important that we consider the contribution already made by the farming community in assisting in the preservation of the countryside and the wider environment. Indeed, as I have stated before, it is important that that contribution be accurately measured, as there will be great importance tied to what more agriculture can do. Equally, however, it is important to understand what the industry already does in that regard.

That issue requires much more work to establish a scientific baseline for carbon sequestration. My view is that, by supporting the private Member's Bill, we step outside the advice of independent experts and support unachievable, unjust targets, with the consequence of making farmers redundant, reducing incomes, decreasing herd sizes and increasing production costs and, potentially, land abandonment. We will make redundant the vital role that our farmers play in food production as custodians of the countryside and those who hold many of the assets that we need to help the environment. Therefore, the ironic result of this move would be detrimental to the environment and to tackling climate change because we would increase global emissions by outsourcing our production to countries with less sustainable production methods. Let us approach the debate with sensible, practical heads and deliver a pragmatic solution that works.

### 1.30 pm

I urge Members to rethink the Bill and put efforts behind the Minister's climate change Bill. I also urge other Executive members to get behind those efforts, which represent the very best opportunity to work towards achievable targets. The unilateral support of our farming and food production stakeholders and representative organisations must be at the core of any efforts as full cooperation and buy-in towards addressing emissions will offer the greatest chance of meeting targets. The Bill has failed already in that regard and must be taken off the table.

**Mr Durkan:** I support the Bill and, indeed, I am privileged to be one of its co-sponsors. I have worked with colleagues across party lines on an issue on which we all recognise that something needs to be done.

The urgent need for a climate change Bill has been well established. The extensive body of research demands that we act immediately — globally, locally and as individuals — in response to the emergency. Climate change is,

arguably, the most serious threat that we face to not just our environment but our health, economic prosperity and global security. The overwhelming scientific consensus points to the fact that the impacts of climate change are accelerating and that they are largely driven by greenhouse gas emissions as a result of human activity. Sadly, although the science is beyond reproach, it appears, like most things in here, that it is not beyond dispute.

If we are to combat the devastating environmental, health, economic and societal impact of climate change, we have, as Ms Bailey outlined, a responsibility to act. We owe it to ourselves and future generations to face up to that uncomfortable reality. No longer can it be swept under the carpet or stuck in a hole in the ground to be dealt with at a later date. Climate change is here; it is happening. We are already bearing witness to its dire consequences that are playing out globally and here on our own doorstep. Communities here have been devastated by flooding in recent years. Fluctuating weather patterns have seen us experience practically every season in the course of the last week. If we are to turn back the clock on climate catastrophe, we cannot afford further delay; we must act now.

It remains a stain on Northern Ireland's record that specific legislation on the prevention of climate breakdown, through emissions reduction targets and working towards carbon neutrality or preparing industry for tomorrow's economy, has taken so long to implement. Credit must be given to citizens and councils here, many of whom have been ahead of the curve by taking individual responsibility to consider their own personal choices and to enact green initiatives. In my constituency, Derry City and Strabane District Council has taken action and declared a climate emergency. It has spearheaded the first council climate adaptation plan in the North and has already launched its climate pledge, which commits the city and district to net zero greenhouse emissions by 2045. Vitality, the council has recognised that climate change is not only a global but a transboundary issue. It has developed the first regional energy strategy in Ireland and has an emerging multi-sectoral north-west climate action plan.

The Executive must work to establish an all-island response to climate change, given the similar challenges that we face in both jurisdictions on this small island. In doing so, we could develop a greater harmonisation of climate data; support for just transition; cross-departmental coordination, with supporting policy; and, most importantly, financial and

funding mechanisms to deliver action on the ground. To truly effect positive change here, we need a strong legal underpinning of climate principles. It now falls to the Executive and the Assembly to play catch-up in that regard.

Some of my SDLP colleagues will go into more intricate detail on the Bill later. Scientific evidence makes it clear that Northern Ireland needs to meet net zero carbon emissions by 2045. That vision can only be achieved through collaborative working, declaring a climate emergency and establishing a mandate for climate change mitigation and adaptation. The role of a Northern Ireland climate office and climate commissioner as overseers will be integral to accomplishing those goals. I agree that these targets are ambitious, but this is not some pie-in-the sky notion. Rather, they are ambitious because they have to be.

**Dr Archibald:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Durkan:** Yes, certainly.

**Dr Archibald:** Does the Member agree that it is important that we have ambitious targets, not just as part of our climate legislation but to inform all the other strategies and policies that are brought through by other Departments and to ensure that the targets that are set within those are ambitious as well?

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for her intervention, and I agree entirely. Everything that we do as legislators or as a legislative body from here on has to take those issues into consideration. We are right to be ambitious and to aim high. For too long, the Executive have rested on their laurels, not to mention the three years of complete inaction that we had in the absence of an Executive, to the detriment of denizens and climate. Successive Administrations here have failed the wishes of some MLAs — I say that as a former Environment Minister — and of people and the deluge of scientific evidence in our inability to grasp the single greatest issue of our time. It has taken a cross-party coalition of MLAs to push forward this crucial legislation, despite the prevarication of others.

In January 2020, all parties committed themselves to the introduction of a climate change Act under New Decade, New Approach, and again, last July, Members stood in this Chamber making the same appeals and similar arguments when we called on Minister Poots to introduce a climate change Bill within three months. Now, almost a year down the line, Northern Ireland remains the only jurisdiction in

these islands without greenhouse gas reduction targets enshrined in law. While the impact of COVID may, in part, explain the recent delay, it cannot be used as an excuse.

The focus on green recovery and the creation of a sustainable society is of even greater significance as we emerge from the fog of COVID. If we have learnt anything from this horrific year, it is that we must do things differently. The pandemic has served as a reminder of the delicate and unpredictable balance between humans and the natural world. It has also given many the opportunity to reconnect with our natural environment and to realise the importance of protecting it. We now need to witness a sea change in behaviours by the powers that be. However, this is the time not for finger-pointing but for rolling up our sleeves and getting our noses to the grindstone. I must, at this point, pay tribute to Climate Coalition Northern Ireland, which has not let up in that regard. It has been an invaluable resource and has worked tirelessly in its mission to put climate action firmly on the agenda. I also thank all the schools, groups, families and individuals who are not only adapting their own ways of doing things, but educating others on the need to change.

So many people and organisations are doing their bit. Within the Executive, my party colleague the Infrastructure Minister, Nichola Mallon, has led the charge. She has wasted no time since taking office in embedding climate change adaptation strategies in her Department. She has placed greater focus on green recovery, including investing in zero-carbon public transport and climate-friendly street lighting and creating a £20 million blue-green infrastructure fund. It is important that, while climate action will be a challenge for all Departments to overcome, Minister Mallon has demonstrated that, even in a Department where climate change targets have posed some of the biggest challenges, she is not afraid to take them on. She has stepped up to the plate and, leading by example, created a picture of what is possible for others to do.

We cannot pretend, however, that there has been, is or even will be consensus on this issue. Reservations and, in some cases, outright opposition about the targets that are set out in the Climate Change Bill have once more reared their head, not unexpectedly, from certain quarters in industry and agriculture. The commercial concerns that have been expressed have perennially been reflected in political opposition to a climate change Act from some quarters in the House. While I understand and appreciate the concerns raised by the UFU in

particular, climate principles will inform the trajectory for practically all future legislation here and beyond.

I agree that farmers and industry should and will be part of the solution. This Bill was forged on the premise of collaboration, which is the basis of all good, solid legislation, and it is that playbook that will instruct how we move forward from here. Engagement with all sectors should not be a by-product of but an integral cog in the legislative process.

I acknowledge that Northern Ireland has a very different landscape from that of Britain, and agri-food represents a huge slice of our economic pie. However, meat and dairy farmers are already feeling the pinch following a shift in consumption habits, with well-known supermarket chains introducing targets on sustainable produce. They cannot deny that that transition demands new thinking on their part, and that is where the Bill comes in. It is about working with, not against, the agri-food sector in order to ensure that it is supported and to enable it to establish sustainable practices, such as incentivising farmers to sequester more carbon in their land as we move forward together.

Healthy debate means that we hear out different viewpoints. It does not, however, mean that we stand still. We have moved, or we are at least moving, beyond the old-world view that environmental requirements must constrain economic performance and productivity. It is possible to create a better environment and a stronger economy, which is a sentiment that Minister Poots shared recently when he went on record affirming that environmental challenges present economic opportunities.

Climate change will affect all sectors, not just agriculture. The possibilities that enacting climate action legislation can bring should be embraced rather than being seen as something negative. The transport sector has grasped that opportunity and committed to transitioning to an entirely renewable energy fleet by 2050. It is that type of initiative that we need to witness elsewhere. Research has shown that the cost savings of decarbonisation will bear fruit by 2050. As such, going green makes positive economic sense. While the green revolution is regarded with apprehension by some, it is undoubtedly a vehicle for prosperity that we need to get on.

Regardless of economic losses or gains, tackling climate change and hitting net zero carbon targets just need to be done. Delivering real, tangible change requires difficult

conversations and difficult decisions. Without courage, there is no progress, and the alternative, which is inaction by the Assembly here and now, does not bear thinking about. Dissenting voices should not be ignored — Mr McAleer outlined how they will not be ignored — but nor can they hinder progress. Wider societal reform is not an ideal but a necessity. We are living in an interconnected climate where an ecological emergency has been driven by human activities. Therefore, ambitious action is critical. How we live our lives is placing pressure on biodiversity. We must learn to do things differently. We must learn to do things better.

Commitment to advance the legislation is a cornerstone of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, which has brought us all here today. We cannot back-pedal on that commitment, nor can we afford a piecemeal approach. The time for climate justice is now. The Bill sets in stone a promise to future generations. It is the embodiment of hope that, together, we can make a difference by creating green, sustainable communities that deliver for everyone. Today's promises guarantee tomorrow's reality. We owe it to our children and future generations to honour that promise.

Given the right leadership and supported by the right legislation, we can deliver change in a manner that will not just help to address the environmental challenges but has the potential to bring about significant economic and societal benefit for all. I support the Bill.

**1.45 pm**

**Dr Aiken:** I support the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill. I will outline my support for its main provisions, coupled with amendments that our party may seek to append at Committee Stage.

First, this is a personal journey for me. It seems unlikely that somebody who comes from my background as a nuclear submarine captain is an eco-warrior, but I take you back to 1987, which was a long time ago. I was operating under the Arctic ice in areas where there was ice that had not shifted in 1,000 years. However, moving on to 2010, when I was back in the Arctic doing other work, that ice had gone. The 1,000-year ice has disappeared. Furthermore, when in Baffin Island doing some research for the Ministry of Defence — I used to be one of the lead researchers on climate change in the Ministry of Defence, particularly what is happening in the Arctic — I saw at first

hand the impact on the tundra and that the permafrost had gone.

Virtually every day now, we see increases in the impact of climate change. When we talk about a climate change emergency, there are very key reasons for that, but there is one piece of information for those who still do not think that this situation is occurring. Part of my job when I was at the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre — that is quite a mouthful — was that I headed up the global strategic trends programme. We helped to fund the Met Office's Hadley Centre, which is designed specifically to research climate change and other areas. That organisation was full of people who were as sceptical as I was to begin with. We have heard many times that no models are predicting our climate well. That is not true. There are models that predicted what is happening right now. When I was due to give evidence at the IPCC and various other places, I was told not to use that evidence because it was so alarmist and that the speed of increases in heat and carbon dioxide emissions meant that we would never be able to reach the global targets that we must meet to prevent a climate catastrophe.

I do not want to be somebody who spends my time going around being a doom merchant. I believe in the future, and I believe in opportunity. However, let us be very clear about this: this climate emergency is happening, and it is happening a lot faster than people think. If we think that, in 2050, we will still be arguing about various parts of agriculture here or, indeed, whether beef will be coming from Brazil, which may, in fact, be a desert by that stage, we need to wake up to the fact that we are in a very, very dangerous situation.

With those provisos, as outlined, the Bill seeks to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of our nation, particularly the provisions of the Climate Change Act 2008 and our national Government's commitment to a 78% carbon reduction target above the 1990s baseline by 2035, with an overall approach of bringing the United Kingdom as a whole to net zero carbon by 2050 at the latest. We have seen that the United States, the EU and our nation are seeking to accelerate carbon reduction targets. COP26 is likely to see an even greater emphasis. However, even if we meet these reduction targets, we will still struggle to avoid breaching a greater than 1.5°C increase by mid-century. The chances of us meeting that target are very low.

Eighteen of the past 20 years were recorded as the hottest since records began. The degradation of the tundra and across the polar

regions and the increasing moves northwards of desertification should be plainly obvious to us all, except those who wilfully ignore the scientific evidence. It is regrettable that, even here in Northern Ireland, at this stage, some choose to ignore the facts of the situation that we now find ourselves in. Northern Ireland and the Assembly have a critical role. The reasoning for the Bill and its substantive 12 clauses is, first and foremost, to recognise that we are in a climate emergency and that we have little time to act. The Northern Ireland Executive and every Department should now take that fact as part of the future Programme for Government, and it should be factored in to all aspects of future outcomes and work strands.

Clauses 2 and 3 set a series of actions on the Executive to deliver and develop sectoral plans and targets. While much of our net carbon reduction can be achieved from the energy, transportation, manufacturing and housing sectors, there remains a considerable amount of comment and concern from sectors of our agriculture industry, as pointed out by the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee.

As a party, our representatives and I have listened to the issues raised by the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association, and the Grain Trade Association, among others. We have also listened intently to the conservation groups, many individual farmers, and, indeed, we have had input from the National Farmers' Union, which, I remind you, now seeks to achieve net zero carbon by 2040. On balance, we understand that the golden objective is to be in line with the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, as set out in the report by Lord Deben, dated 1 April, which outlines proposals for Northern Ireland to achieve at least an 82% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. I emphasise the words "at least".

The Assembly is aware that, elsewhere in our nation, there are moves to accelerate the timing of this target. While the difference between 2045 and 2050 may appear to be slight, it has to be recognised that it has exercised some of our farming community. Therefore, we expect to achieve the bulk of the necessary reductions well before 2045, as our entire nation moves to an electric economy. However, we need to help the farming industry transition as, according to the Ulster Farmers' Union, it intends to. We will propose amendments at Committee Stage to enshrine those reduced targets so that we do not significantly damage the agriculture business sector and allow it to transition effectively.

We seek to amend the date in clause 2(2) to read:

*"2045, and as far as practicable, based on the provisions of the Climate Change Committee report in respect to agriculture, to achieving their targets for 2050."*

The reality is quite clear. The bulk of carbon reductions that we need to achieve has to come from transport, energy, manufacturing and housing, but we cannot get to a situation where we fundamentally damage our agribusiness while we do that. As a party, we recognise that and are trying to achieve it.

We also seek to see provisions made for the Departments of Agriculture and the Economy, which recently commissioned a study by Sir Peter Kendall on the future shape of the agribusiness sector in Northern Ireland. Most of that is to do with the protocol and how it reshapes itself. However, Peter Kendall talks clearly about the fact that agribusiness needs to be smarter. It is not necessarily about making it smaller, but smarter. If you look at some of the work that he has done for the National Farmers' Union and in other areas, you can see that the Northern Ireland agribusiness sector, which is vital to our economy, has a real opportunity for the future, but we need to embrace it.

The safeguards that we have been talking about, and the examples of democratic accountability that are built into the Bill and laid out in the clauses, allow the Assembly to have the final say in the changes. That is important because, unlike things such as the protocol legislation, which we will have no say in whatsoever, the Assembly will be able to look at the Bill as it comes through, modify any targets that are set and enable the Northern Ireland Executive to set the action plans. It gives us some real democratic accountability.

**Mr McAleer:** Will the Member take an intervention?

**Dr Aiken:** Certainly.

**Mr McAleer:** Does the Member agree that, in addition to the democratic oversight in the Assembly, any carbon action plans produced will come about only after a 16-week public consultation? That is crucial.

**Dr Aiken:** I agree. That demonstrates that another safeguard is being put into the process. It would be good if the Minister had been able to say that he sees the work that the Assembly and the private Member's Bill are doing and

takes the opportunity to bring them together. We do no service at all to Northern Ireland, our economy or our environment unless we are seen to be particularly proactive. We have that opportunity to be proactive. I am —.

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

**Dr Aiken:** Yes, Jim.

**Mr Allister:** The Member talks about responding to communities, particularly the agriculture community etc. In clause 11(2), however, the door is slammed shut to all the sectors by virtue of the fact that it states:

*"the Executive Office must not propose any alteration which has the effect, whether directly or indirectly, of lowering any target"*

that is set in the legislation. Is it not, therefore, hyperbole to say that they will listen, when the very legislation that the Members want to take forward slams the door on listening?

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Member for his intervention. As he will be aware, when we guided his Bill through the Assembly, 82 amendments were tabled to it, and amendments made it a much better piece of legislation. We will have the opportunity to look at this Bill as we go forward. When it is brought in front of the Agriculture Committee and debated in the Chamber, we should be able to look at some of those issues quite closely.

I will draw my remarks to a close. It is quite clear that there are a lot of differing views throughout the Assembly on what we are trying to do on climate change. Many Members are quite concerned about climate change and the impact that it will have on the agribusiness sector. Indeed, many have been very strongly lobbied. I respect those Members' views and any particular stance that they may wish to take. I will say this, however: we have an opportunity, as an Assembly, to do something that is not an orange or green issue or that deals with the bickering that we have all the time in the Northern Ireland Executive. We have a real opportunity to do something that is right for everybody in Northern Ireland, not just for now but well into the future. I commend the Bill's Second Stage to the House.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Question Time begins at 2:00 pm, so it would be an injustice if Mr John Blair were allowed only two and half minutes before I interrupted him. I therefore suggest that the House take its ease until 2.00 pm. When the debate resumes, the next

Member to speak will be, as I said, Mr John Blair.

*The debate stood suspended.*

**2.00 pm**

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

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Communities

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Before we go to the first question, I advise Members that questions 2 and 3 have been withdrawn. I call Mr William Humphrey.

#### Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service

1. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Communities whether she will match the funding provided by Belfast City Council to the Belfast citywide tribunal service. (AQO 1989/17-22)

**Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):** I have agreed my Department's final budget allocations, and, as I committed to previously, I have protected the budget for those vital services. There is no reduction in the budget for advice services, including for appeals and tribunal representation. As the Department allocates funding for those services through local government, Belfast City Council is responsible for deciding how it allocates funding for the appeals services, including the Belfast citywide tribunal service. I am investing £6.4 million this year in a wide range of advice, appeals and debt services. There are no additional moneys over and above that amount that could be used to match any increase in funding by Belfast City Council at this time.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for her answer. I understand that Belfast City Council has agreed to provide £75,000 for this year and £55,000 for the following year, subject to due diligence. Will the Minister commit to supporting, in kind, the monetary value that Belfast City Council wants to provide? Her answer fell short in that regard.

**Ms Hargey:** We have made the allocation to maintain the budget that was there previously. That money goes to Belfast City Council and is ring-fenced for use in advice and representation. I have had no further requests. However, as I said, the budget that we have is the budget that we have got. There is nothing additional, at this point. Of course, if a request is made, I will be happy to look at the issues. The Department is working within a constrained budget — effectively, a cut — but I am glad that

we were able to protect that vital funding at this time.

**Mr Sheehan:** Will the Minister give an assurance that funding will continue to be provided to support the important work of tribunal representations?

**Ms Hargey:** I have given a commitment, as was seen in the draft Budget consultation and the full equality impact assessment that I put out. Money was not secured in the overarching Budget, but I have secured it within my internal budget. I have seen the vital role of the advice sector, not only during the pandemic but before it, and in my time as a councillor in Belfast City Council, for example. I want to continue to do all that I can to support the sector and work with it in the time ahead.

**Mr O'Toole:** The Minister will be aware that, last week, the president of Appeal Tribunals, John Duffy, published his report on the standards of decision-making by the Department for Communities in 2017-18. In it, he talks about the:

*"systemic problem with the healthcare professional (HCP) assessment process",*

particularly in relation to the personal independence payment (PIP) and the employment and support allowance (ESA). Considering John Duffy's representations, what is the Minister doing to simplify the process? For instance, are she and her Department finally considering the requirement, via legislation, of a short GP summary report ahead of initial decisions being made?

**Ms Hargey:** I am looking at the report, and we will be providing a response. The report was taken from the start of the PIP process. Obviously, changes have been made since then, and there will continue to be changes in the process to make sure that it is working as best it can for claimants. We want to announce plans to engage in a more structured way with those claiming the benefits and listen to their views so that we continue to make changes in the time ahead. That is something that I am committing to doing. We will also look at PIP more fundamentally to make sure that it is responding to people's needs.

There are some issues pertaining to parity with Westminster, and there are ongoing discussions with DWP. A Green Paper is being looked at in Westminster, and we are waiting on the outcomes of that coming forward. In the

time ahead, I will be making more announcements around this area.

**Ms Armstrong:** Minister, I know that you are committed to the advice sector. In 2016, a Deloitte report confirmed that a new funding model was needed for the Belfast citywide tribunal service. What actions have you taken to move those recommendations forward, ensure that there is not a postcode lottery across Northern Ireland and ensure that those recommendations will be aligned across all council areas?

**Ms Hargey:** Obviously, we work closely with Belfast City Council on taking that work forward. We secure the money for the advice services, and I am glad that we were able to do that this time around. We have continued discussions with the council and, indeed, with the advice sector itself. In the time ahead, we will be looking at what changes can be made to ensure that advice services are available to people, right across the board and across all communities, and how we can remove any particular barriers. We will continue to have those discussions with Belfast City Council and, importantly, with the advice sector.

**Mr Carroll:** It is very disappointing that the Department is not providing match funding for that vital service, which has provided support for tens of thousands of people, including my constituents. Many will ask how things have got this far, why the funding was not included in the budget after implementing welfare reform, why Belfast City Council has to match fund half of it and why the Department cannot fully fund it for next year. Minister, what message does it send to advice workers, citywide and across the North, that you have not done this?

**Ms Hargey:** I have worked very well with the independent advice sector over the last year, particularly through the COVID pandemic. I have engaged with that sector, as have my officials. We have invested over £6.4 million per annum into budgets for independent advice because we recognise the importance of it. I also encourage councils to look at this issue. I was in Belfast City Council when funding was put into the advice sector. The budget is what it is. It is not a good budget, but the issue is that it was given in a block grant. Effectively, there was a cut by the British Government to the budget here. I have raised concerns about that. I raise it any time I meet a Minister. I met with a Minister from the NIO last Thursday and, again, raised the issue that, when they give a flat budget, in real terms, it means a cut. I also raised the issue that New Decade, New

Approach commitments around financing still have not been lived up to and that they need to come forward urgently to address those shortcomings. So I will not be found wanting. That said, in the absence of a budget being allocated, I have protected the money that goes into the advice sector, and I will continue to do that in the time ahead.

## Ards Football Club

4. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the support she will provide to Ards Football Club with its plan to develop a new stadium so that home games can be played in Newtownards. (AQO 1992/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** I thank the Member for his question and, indeed, the email that gave more information on Ards Football Club. I am pleased to see the renewed engagement between Ards Football Club and Ards and North Down Borough Council in their vision for a new stadium that would, once again, give the club a permanent home in the Newtownards community. Unfortunately, with regard to funding to develop club facilities, there are currently no capital grant programmes in my Department or Sport NI to which Ards Football Club can apply. My officials have advised the club to register with Sport NI to receive information on future potential funding programmes that may assist it in realising the ambition to develop the new stadium.

Ards Football Club may benefit from future potential funding through the subregional stadia programme that was set out in New Decade, New Approach. I have asked officials to undertake a review of the programme to satisfy me that proposals are meeting current and future needs.

The refresh and re-engagement review exercise is nearing completion, and the evidence collected, through club surveys, strategic one-to-one discussions with key stakeholders and collaboration with the advisory working group, has informed the shape and scope of the programme. I intend to update Executive colleagues in the coming weeks on the future implementation of the programme, identify potential timelines for delivery and the levels of support available to clubs across the North.

**Mr Harvey:** Thank you very much, Minister, for your answer. As you know, I have been trying to strike up a conversation with you on this proposal. I ask that you meet me and the

manager at the proposed site to look at and listen to the vision and to respond with your thoughts on the way forward.

**Ms Hargey:** I am always happy to accept invitations from Members.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Will the Minister clarify whether she is saying that there is no budget for the subregional stadia programme in the current financial year? If that is the case, when does she expect that money to be freed up?

**Ms Hargey:** There is a budget and a commitment of £36.6 million for the subregional stadia programme. The exercise that took place was to make sure that the initial outcomes of that programme still meet the needs today. A refresh and re-engagement review exercise was taken forward with sports organisations, including a survey that my officials are now tidying up, and they will make a proposal to me on the way forward for spending that money. I want to present that to the Executive in the coming weeks in order to get the programme up and running.

**Ms Armstrong:** I declare an interest, because I pay sponsorship money into Ards Football Club for its programmes. Minister, I am disappointed by your answers so far, but I understand the predicament that we are in. Ards Football Club has not had a home for quite some time. You said that the subregional stadia programme money might not actually be money that Ards could apply for, because it has no home at the moment. Have there been any discussions with the Strategic Investment Board about capital expenditure that clubs would be able to apply for?

**Ms Hargey:** Currently, there is no other capital programme. This is across a number of sporting organisations. I have engaged heavily with sporting organisations over the past couple of months. Obviously, they have been impacted by the pandemic. They have played a huge role during the pandemic and will, no doubt, in the recovery. All Members have raised questions for oral and written answer over the past year on the importance of sports more generally, and I completely recognise that.

The money that we have at the moment is for the subregional stadia programme. I also recognise, and have said previously, that that may not be enough to meet the demand. Most certainly, it will not be enough. Obviously, I will have to keep discussions ongoing with the Executive. It will be dependent on the Budget and what is available and will be measured

against other pressures in Health and Education more broadly. If there is a need for a capital increase, I will make those representations and requests to the Executive.

I have not had direct engagement with the Strategic Investment Board, but that is certainly something that I could do. I am keen at some point to look at a small capital programme for sports organisations, recognising that not all fit into the subregional stadia programme. A lot of work goes on, particularly at the grass roots. We have no budget for that, but, again, I am keen to engage with the Executive to see whether we can find a budget to bring forward programmes. There is no doubt that there is a huge need and demand in the community, and that is something that I want to continue to engage on.

## **PIP Appeal Hearings: North Antrim**

**5. Mr Frew** asked the Minister for Communities how many people in North Antrim are awaiting a personal independence payment (PIP) appeal hearing. (AQO 1993/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** My Department does not hold record information based on constituency. However, the details of the number of personal independence payment appeals, pending per town in North Antrim, as of 31 March this year are: Ballymena 310 and Ballymoney 98, making a total of 408 people in the North Antrim area who are waiting on an appeal hearing.

**Mr Frew:** Thank you, Minister, for your answer to my question. To get some sort of comparison and context for those figures, will you supply numbers for previous years?

**Ms Hargey:** I do not have those at hand but I can write to you formally, Paul, with an update on previous years.

**Ms Kimmins:** Minister, you will be aware of the importance of ensuring that those going through the appeals process are not suffering financially. Will you therefore outline what steps you are taking to ensure that that is not the case?

**2.15 pm**

**Ms Hargey:** Mitigation payments continue for appellants who are awaiting the outcome of an appeal, for cases where the initial claim was for disability living allowance (DLA) and for those who are transitioning to PIP. My Department has advised appellants who experience

financial hardship that they should make contact with their local office as soon as possible and should engage with the independent advice sector.

We want to address the backlog of hearings. Part of that was caused by having to suspend face-to-face hearings because of coronavirus. We have been transitioning, and we have been rolling out pilots for telephone assessments as well as looking at carrying out assessments virtually. Again, though, it is down to what the claimant wants, and we know that the majority still prefer face-to-face assessments. As easements to regulations come in, we are working with the appeals service on how we can start to safely reopen face-to-face services and deal with the backlog as soon as possible.

**Mr Allister:** The figure of 310 from Ballymena is particularly disappointing, although it does not surprise me. My office has an appeal next week that has been waiting 14 months. Will the Minister supply the average waiting time for an appeal in North Antrim? That certainly seems to be something that needs to be taken under control. The return of face-to-face services would be a major step forward.

**Ms Hargey:** I do not have the exact waiting time, but I can furnish you with that in a written response. I know that the caseload from 31 March this year was 8,639. As of the same period, 6,067 live PIP appeals are in the system. That makes up 71% of the overall caseload. As I said, a big part of that was caused by appeals completely shutting down during the pandemic that started in March last year. The appeals service extended that at the start of this year after the new restrictions came in over Christmas. There is no doubt that that led to unacceptable levels of appeals.

Officials are now working with the service and the advice sector to look at how we can have a safe reopening and increase capacity to deal with those levels as soon as possible. As I said, my officials have also been rolling out pilots for telephone and virtual assessments while recognising that the majority of people still prefer face-to-face assessments and that, if that is what they prefer, we will have to deal with it. I am hopeful that, with the easing of more restrictions, with those pilots and with jobs and benefits offices and other services beginning to open again as a result of the easing, we can start to deal with that and get people through the process as quickly as possible. I will furnish you with an answer to the specifics of your question in a written response.

**Mr Durkan:** The number of appeals and, more so, the number of successful appeals are clear evidence that the system is not working. Many parties, including the Minister's, have been correctly scathing about Capita's performance. Will the Minister inform the House whether she will extend Capita's contract? How might that look, and how much might it cost?

**Ms Hargey:** Those issues are being looked at. I recognise the issues with the assessment. I also recognise the public opinion on some of the issues. I have indicated that my policy position is to move towards an in-house model, and I indicated what that would look like. Previously, the in-house model involved working with local GPs, and difficulties were presented with that. We are also looking at the Scottish model, where they work with health trusts, and we have had engagements with the Health Minister, but, again, changes have to be made there. For example, the system on which people are recorded is different depending on the health trust. There is no one database the way there is in England. We found that to be an issue with the food distribution service, where there was no single database. I know that it will take a bit of time for the Department of Health to put that in place, but I am keen that a policy be adopted where we move to an in-house service. We are trying to work out the timelines for that. Once I have made a decision about that and about what the timescales will look like, I will certainly update the House and the Committee.

## Universal Credit: Legacy Claimants

6. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the process of moving legacy benefit claimants to universal credit (UC). (AQO 1994/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Thank you. People who remain in receipt of legacy benefits and credits will be moved to universal credit in the next phase of the roll-out known as "Move to UC". Prior to COVID-19, my Department notified stakeholders here that the planned commencement date for Move to UC would not be before January 2021, with an estimated completion date of September 2024. Planning for Move to UC was temporarily paused to allow my Department to focus all available resources on responding to the COVID pandemic, and, as the Member will know, the number of people who need universal credit here has more than doubled since then. We had to respond to make sure that people were paid. A date for the commencement of Move to UC here has not been confirmed. I have asked my officials for an

assessment of the optimal timing for the Move to UC process to recommence here and will bring forward proposals for doing so at the earliest possible opportunity. Stakeholders will be updated when plans are more certain.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Minister for her answer. The Minister will be aware that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions recently announced that the process for moving legacy benefit claimants on to universal credit would be completed by 2024. Can the Minister confirm whether that is the timeline that her Department will work to in the coming months? Will she engage further with the independent advice sector to enable it to support claimants who will need help transferring to or not to universal credit in the coming years?

**Ms Hargey:** As I said, there was a pause in the move, and that may disrupt the timetable and that final date. My officials are working closely with the Department for Work and Pensions in Britain on that timescale. That is why I have asked for an assessment of recommencing the process and of how long that will then take. That will be for ministerial approval going forward. Once I have that assessment, I will decide when it is likely that we can commence that work. Of course, that will be done by engaging stakeholders and looking at the implications. This will be a huge change for thousands and thousands of people, and having independent advice for people as they are transitioning will be key in making sure that the capacity is there. We will do that by engaging with the sector, and, after that, I will make my decision and notify the House.

**Ms Anderson:** Minister, can you give an assurance to my constituents in Derry and others across the North that those who are being transferred from legacy benefits to universal credit will have a transitional protection? What would that transitional protection be?

**Ms Hargey:** We are looking at transitional protections for people who are moving over. Some people will be financially better off with a move to universal credit. We want to work with those people in the time ahead and look at the implications as part of that transitional period. We are looking at that as part of the transitional assessment that I have asked officials to look at. Once I have that assessment, I will update the House. I can also correspond with the Member directly.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** The Member is not in her place for the next question, so I call Christopher Stalford.

### **Casement Park: Consultation with Residents' Groups**

8. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister for Communities to outline what consultation she has had with the residents' groups adjacent to Casement Park, in particular the Mooreland and Owenvarragh Residents' Association. (AQO 1996/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Through the regional stadia programme, my Department has grant funded the three sporting codes to deliver their respective stadia. Community engagement is an important element of the delivery. In anticipation of planning approval, Ulster GAA is finalising detailed proposals for fresh engagement with the community. The GAA is clear on the importance of being a good neighbour to the community around Casement Park and more broadly, and I have regular engagement with the Ulster Council GAA project team, which is involved in the stadium development, on the fundamental element of the project.

**Mr Stalford:** I did not anticipate being called for question 8, so I congratulate the Minister on her brevity in getting this far down the list. That said, the Minister has failed to answer my question. I asked her what engagement she or her Department had had with residents in the area on the development proposal. Does she agree that it is important that residents' views on the matter are taken on board?

**Ms Hargey:** Thank you. The overall project is owned by Ulster Council GAA, and I have been encouraging the GAA to engage. That said, planning approval is not yet complete, and we need to watch the type of engagement that we have until we know that full planning approval has been granted. I have engaged with the GAA through the programme board that has been established to look at the redevelopment of Casement Park. From my background in community development, I have said that it needs to engage proactively. It has an engagement strategy for when planning has been approved.

I have had no direct engagement with the residents' group, neither those who oppose it nor those who support it. I am waiting for planning permission to be approved, because I do not want to do anything that might have an impact on that consideration. There will be

comprehensive engagement. I have pushed the GAA to have that and to work with Belfast City Council and the Department to look at the wider issues and opportunities that the redevelopment can bring. The Members knows what the development of Windsor Park has done for the community in his constituency.

**Ms Flynn:** What is the Minister's assessment of the benefits that the Casement Park development will bring to the wider community of west Belfast and, more broadly, to Gaelic games and culture?

**Ms Hargey:** If you go to Casement Park, you will see the state that it is in at the moment. As a past camogie player, I know that there is a huge aspiration and demand to see Casement Park revitalised and redeveloped. The scale of the infrastructure will have an immediate impact on construction jobs. It is one of the biggest infrastructure projects that the Executive will take forward in this mandate, once the approval is signed off, in the number of jobs that will come directly from it.

There is the redevelopment of the wider Andersonstown area. If you look at the Falls Road from the bottom right up, you see that there have been huge developments over the last 10 years in the west of the city. Casement Park will be one of the signature projects on the frontage of that road. I have been working with the GAA, and we want to see a wider community impact not just for the Gaels to play in a stadium but for how this pitch and its facilities can be used by other sports organisations and the wider community. There will be huge economic, social, cultural and sporting benefits for the community. We have seen those benefits with the other two stadia that have been developed in the partnering and outreach work that they have done with local sports organisations in growing their sport, particularly for women and people with disabilities. I hope that the redevelopment of Casement Park will bring good opportunities, just as the other stadia have done.

**Mr O'Toole:** Casement will be a huge benefit not just for Ulster Gaels or for Antrim GAA. It is hugely overdue and will be welcome when, hopefully, it is built. However, the potential is much wider than that. It could be global. At the minute, there are plans for a joint British-Irish World Cup bid for 2030. The truth is that Casement Park will probably be the only stadium in Northern Ireland capable of hosting World Cup games. Minister, what representations are you making with the Irish Football Association (IFA), the Football

Association of Ireland (FAI) and the FA in London in order to place Casement Park at the centre of that potential World Cup bid, which could bring World Cup football to Belfast?

**Ms Hargey:** Thank you for your question. You are right: Casement Park is the stadium that would advance that competition bid. The Minister for the Economy takes the lead on the engagement with London, but, in my capacity as sports Minister, I have engaged proactively with our officials and with the Minister for the Economy to outline the potential of facilities such as Casement as part of that bid. We will keep that engagement going, but it is primarily the Minister for the Economy who represents the Executive in applying for the games.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** We will probably have time just for the Minister's answer, without the supplementary.

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

9. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the allocation of funding for the subregional stadia programme for soccer. (AQO 1997/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** The Member will be aware that the subregional stadia programme for soccer is a priority in 'New Decade, New Approach', and I have consistently confirmed my commitment to it. The programme provides a real opportunity to deliver a wider range of government priorities and to address social, economic and cultural needs. I have asked my officials to undertake a review of the programme to satisfy me that the proposals look not just at the current needs but at the future needs.

### **2.30 pm**

As I said in response to question 4, the refresh and re-engagement exercise is nearing completion. I hope to have that presented to me, and then, in the coming weeks, I want to make a presentation to the Executive for sign-off in order to allow the programme to go forward. Departmental officials have also worked with experts on an advisory group comprising key stakeholders from the Chief Leisure Officers Association (CLOA), the IFA, the NI Football League (NIFL), Sport NI and my Department. That has ensured a collaborative approach to developing the shape and scope of the programme.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

### **Changing Places**

T1. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for Communities to outline a timeline for when she will create a fund to encourage the creation of changing places — state-of-the-art facilities for those who have severe disabilities — in buildings across Northern Ireland. (AQT 1271/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Since 2018-19, my Department has been working in partnership with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, local councils and the Public Health Agency (PHA) on access to changing facilities. A total of 12 new changing place facilities, at a range of locations across the North, have been supported through the programme. My Department is leading on the development of the Executive's disability strategy. As part of that strategy, we have developed a co-design approach with the sector, including for changing place provision. We are working with the Department of Finance to consider how the issues will be reflected in the new strategy and to determine the funding that will be made available. Subject to that, after consultation, I will present the full disability strategy to the Executive in December.

**Mr Chambers:** I thank the Minister for her answer. England has created a similar fund of £30 million. Can the Minister commit to a proportionate level of funding in Northern Ireland?

**Ms Hargey:** There are ongoing discussions about finance and what it will mean in the time ahead. Once that has been confirmed, I will update Members.

### **Poverty Alleviation: Ministerial Plans**

T2. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister for Communities what she plans to do differently to tackle the shocking levels of poverty, given that she will be aware that recent figures highlighted the fact that 400,000 people across Northern Ireland are living in poverty, with 27% of those people residing in the Londonderry and Strabane council area in his constituency. (AQT 1272/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** The poverty figures are well known. They have been highlighted, and everybody has seen that they have been

exacerbated as a result of the pandemic. As part of New Decade, New Approach, I had responsibility for taking forward an anti-poverty strategy, which includes child poverty. We established an expert panel, which published its report in March. We have now established a co-design group that is working with community organisations and experts involved in the fields of child poverty and poverty more broadly. We have also established a cross-departmental working group, because it is recognised that the issue of poverty does not rest just with my Department but spans Departments. I know that, last week, the Health Committee looked at a report on health inequalities that showed that the numbers have got worse rather than better.

We are working across government to look at what comes out of the co-design approach, at how the strategy will be funded and at how Departments can take a lead on certain aspects. The strategy will then go out to public consultation. I hope that the timeline will be for me to present the strategy, along with the other inclusion strategies, for sign-off and approval in December. There is other work ongoing. I have papers in on welfare mitigations and other protections. There is also the whole housing transformation that we are trying to do, as we recognise that housing plays a fundamental role. We are looking at areas such as Foyle, where there are high levels of people in housing need. I want to introduce ring-fenced funding to start to address the housing crisis in Foyle, north and west Belfast and other areas.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Minister for her response. The Minister will also be aware that there are particular challenges in our rural communities. I have heard time and time again about the difference in funding available for some of the more urban communities and that available for rural communities. Will the Minister commit to addressing and putting a focus on how we bring rural communities up to par with many of our urban villages?

**Ms Hargey:** It is an important point. I want to make sure that we are rural-proofing our policies and our spend. That will ultimately mean a change in spend and how money is allocated, for example through councils and other mechanisms. I am committed to looking at all those issues. I have also written about regeneration functions. Primarily, in the Department, mine is focused on urban settings. Many Members have written to me recently about rural settings.

I have engaged with the AERA Minister and the Infrastructure Minister to get a joined-up approach to rural issues and rural inequality.

That has been positive. We provided some funding during the pandemic to respond to the needs of the rural community. We will bring forward that engagement soon. I have asked for a meeting with them. We will assess rural proofing and, hopefully, we can make a joint announcement between the three Ministries on making a change in those areas. As part of the housing programme, looking, again, at specific rural needs, we met community organisations in rural areas where those issues have been consistently raised. Working with the other Ministries, we want to bring forward proposals for changes to address the issues.

## Social Housing

T3. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for Communities to set out her commitment to and plans for increasing social housing. (AQT 1273/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** That has been raised regularly. When Carál Ní Chuilín was in the ministerial position last November, she made a statement setting out the trajectory on what we need to do on housing in the time ahead. There are huge changes relating to revitalising the Housing Executive, such as ensuring that it deals with its historic debt issues, looking at the £7 billion deficit that it needs in order to maintain its current stock, and freeing it up to allow it to build again. We have established a programme board with the Housing Executive and the Strategic Investment Board to look at models and options. I want to do that while retaining the current set-up of the Housing Executive. We are looking at that at the moment.

We had a good result on corporation tax. Over the last six years, the Housing Executive paid over £56 million in corporation tax. We have been exempted from that and are trying to claw some of the money back and to deal with historic debt. We will soon consult on a housing supply strategy. We will look at supply, right to buy, and ring fencing. We will also look at an exercise to identify surplus land and will work with local councils so that they can identify public land in their areas in order to address housing. We are starting to work with the Housing Executive to look at towns and city centres, for example, the Living over the Shop scheme. Are there things that we can do? We will even look at buying back homes to reintroduce them to the public housing market.

I am glad that we have seen an increase of £26 million in the housing budget this year. This year's budget is £162 million. Also in 2020-21, we had the first increase of its kind for a decade

in new social homes started: we had 2,403 homes. I want to ensure that we can build the capacity and have the finance to look at increasing housing development over the next period.

**Mr McHugh:** Thank you for your answer, Minister. You and your Department are to be congratulated on the objectives that have been achieved to date for the completion of new social housing and on the fact that you have exceeded targets for commencement and completion. What steps are you taking to ensure that that trajectory continues?

**Ms Hargey:** We have set up programme boards to bring forward proposed models on the way forward to deal with some of the historic debt issues and the finances of the Housing Executive. All of this work will culminate in a proposal, with timescales and finance attached, that I will present to the Executive before the end of this mandate for sign-off and approval. As I said, I am also moving forward with engagements and consultations about a supply strategy for the North, and I am looking to introduce things such as ring-fencing, which will be done in this mandate. However, the longer-term challenges will be presented in a comprehensive report to the Executive before the end of this mandate, and work is well under way to develop that.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** As the Member is not in his place for Question 4, we will move on. I call Órlaithí Flynn for her question.

## Private Rented Sector: Safety Measures

T5. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister for Communities to outline her plans to legislate to ensure that people and families living in the private rented sector have a safe and secure home. (AQT 1275/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Yes. I will be bringing forward legislation. A proposal for the first strand of legislation to build in extra protections for those living in the private rented sector is currently with the Executive. When you look at the revitalisation of housing and what needs to be done on that, you see that there are more children and families now living in the private rented sector than in the social sector. The conditions and the safety standards for those people is a huge area, so part of the legislation will look at health and safety in homes and

issues such as electrical checks and the installation of carbon monoxide alarms.

We are drafting other legislation concerning the private rented sector in order to deal with issues such as letting agents and having a longer-term review. However, there are consultations and engagements that need to happen around those other areas of work, particularly around enhancing the role of councils in enforcement. I hope that the Executive will soon sign off on the introduction of a draft Bill, the first part of that legislation. Then, we will work on and draft supplementary legislation before the end of this mandate.

**Ms Flynn:** Minister, you have partly answered my supplementary question. First, I am delighted to hear that legislation is being prepared and will be progressed, because we know how many families are living in substandard housing accommodation. It is not fair; it is not right. Can you elaborate on the timeline for that legislation's progression?

**Ms Hargey:** I want the first part of the legislation to be completed by the end of this mandate. I have engaged with the Committee for Communities and highlighted a number of pieces of legislation that I want to bring forward by the end of this mandate. I will go through the normal process of introducing legislation in the Assembly, and it will go to the Committee for consideration. I am hopeful that we will have that legislation in place by the end of this mandate. That is the timeline that I am working to in order to bring in that protection for residents in the private rented sector.

## Lottery-type Fundraising: Legislative Changes

T6. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for Communities to detail how organisations such as charities, voluntary groups and sports clubs will benefit from the changes to legislation governing lotteries. (AQT 1276/17-22)

**Ms Hargey:** Yes. I was glad to change the legislation to allow those organisations to sell lottery tickets online for fundraising activities. This primarily came from a request from NICVA, from the sector itself, which asked us to look at this and to look at more flexibility that could be built in, because of the impact that the pandemic has had on the ability of charities and others to fundraise. I am delighted that we have been able to make this change and that those organisations will be able to fundraise through ticketing and lottery schemes. It lifts the block, and it is something that the sector wanted.

**Ms Kimmins:** I thank the Minister for her answer. I think that it is important to welcome the Minister's commitment to addressing this issue as it does open vital funding streams for many organisations, particularly as we come out of the current pandemic. Can she provide an update on any other supports that are available to help community, cultural and sporting organisations through this pandemic?

**Ms Hargey:** Overall, the Department has invested over £306 million as part of the COVID moneys over the last year. A large part of that went to food support and community support programmes that run through councils. We have been working collaboratively with councils, which, ultimately, work with community organisations at the grassroots level.

**2.45 pm**

I stood up a community emergencies leadership group, which involved grassroots and strategic organisations that have helped us to craft our response to the COVID pandemic and also to look at the recovery. Just over two weeks ago, I met that group to look at social recovery. Obviously, at present, we are bidding for COVID money with regard to restrictions being eased. I want to continue to try to support the sports sector, the charity sector, community development organisations and the culture, arts and heritage sector. I have made bids for COVID money to try to look at that in the time ahead. One area that we have secured in the budget is the £9 million for homelessness services. Particularly as restrictions begin to ease, that may actually bring issues such as homelessness to light. We want to ensure that we work with the sector and have the resources in place to do that. I will continue to engage as we move forward.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Time is up for topical questions. I ask Members to take their ease before the next item of business.

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

## Economy

### University and College Union: Ministerial Meetings

1. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy why she has not met the University and College Union (UCU) since assuming office. (AQO 2004/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):** I thank the Member for his question. In June 2020, the University and College Union requested a meeting with me regarding the further education advisory and oversight group that I established to look at the reopening of colleges. I was unable to fulfil that request due to diary commitments. Following the commencement of pay negotiations, further meetings have been requested with regard to those negotiations. It would not be appropriate for me to meet the UCU in those circumstances, as those negotiations are between the employers — the colleges — and the trade union side. I hope that we can find a resolution to the current situation. Students and lecturers have had an extremely difficult time over the past year. In order to make a recovery, we need to focus on skills and the economy. We need everyone to work together to do that.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Minister for her answer. However, I and many workers in the UCU find it frankly insulting and offensive that she refused to meet them and their reps directly. At any time, and at any level, that is unacceptable, but especially in the middle of a pandemic, when workers have worked throughout it while in dispute with their employers. Currently, in further education, they are taking strike action. Not only has the Minister refused to meet unions and workers' representatives, but she and her officials have met employers during the same period — one side in the dispute.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Can the Member come to his question, please?

**Mr Carroll:** How can those workers and UCU members have any faith in the Minister's being objective and impartial if she meets only one side and refuses to meet the other?

**Mrs Dodds:** I refer the Member to my previous answer. It is inappropriate for me to meet the union at this particular stage. I and the Department will have to act with a degree of objectivity on the outcome of those negotiations and the business case that will be brought forward following them. I urge both sides to redouble their efforts to bring the process to a conclusion. I have notified the Finance Minister and the Department of Finance that there will be a need for additional funding following the conclusion of the negotiations. It is in everybody's interests — lecturers and students — to bring the situation to a speedy conclusion. I wish them well in doing that, and I will do my best to work for that end once the negotiations have come to a conclusion.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Minister for her answers. I accept to a point that it is not the role of the Minister to negotiate in industrial disputes, but a meeting with the Minister, whether it is with the employer side or the trade union side, can bring a certain atmosphere to negotiations that allows them to be successful. Will the Minister reconsider her decision to not meet the UCU? I also urge her to reconsider her decision to not meet the students' unions, which are also an important voice in our further and higher education lobby.

**Mrs Dodds:** I can only refer the Member to my previous answer. It is important that we are objective in our role, that we fulfil that role, which is a legal responsibility, to the full and that the employers, that is, the further education colleges, and the unions are able to make an appropriate agreement. If that happens, I will not be found wanting in trying to resolve the outstanding issues.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Thank you, Minister, for your answers so far. Given the flexibility of Zoom, will you commit today to meeting representatives of the students' unions so that they can discuss their situation with COVID supports?

**Mrs Dodds:** As the Member knows, I do many, many Zoom meetings in a day. Those meetings can be very hectic and take place back to back. I have met the students' representatives — I will meet them again in due course — and I know that students have been through a difficult time over the past year. That is why I have moved to provide the supports that we have available, and the most generous support package in the whole of the United Kingdom is for students in Northern Ireland.

## **ExcludedNI: Ministerial Engagement**

2. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on whether she has engaged with ExcludedNI. (AQO 2005/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for his question. I met representatives of ExcludedNI in September, along with Stewart Dickson. Since then, my officials have continued to engage with them and with other organisations as we have developed the COVID-19 supports that local businesses have found invaluable. I will continue to engage with a diverse range of representative organisations as we focus on economic recovery through the economic recovery action plan.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I call Stewart Dickson. Sorry, I call Mike Nesbitt for a supplementary. Apologies.

**Mr Nesbitt:** How very dare you. *[Laughter.]* I thank the Minister for the answer. ExcludedNI would be interested to know, with regard to the COVID restrictions business support scheme (CRBSS) part B, when her Department intends to release payments for the period beginning 31 March.

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department has continued to release payments through all the schemes. Indeed, only recently, we sought Executive agreement to extend part B of the scheme that the Member referred to so that people could avail themselves of it right up until 23 May, which is when we hope to see a lifting of many of the restrictions that hold businesses back.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you for your answers, Minister, and thank you, Mr Nesbitt, for tabling the question. Minister, you met ExcludedNI. Since that time, sterling work has been done in the background between it and many of the organisations and schemes that you have been working with and through. Do you have further plans to support the events and wedding industry in Northern Ireland as we emerge from the COVID pandemic? How will they fit into your recovery plans?

**Mrs Dodds:** The Member rightly identifies some of the core issues. In Northern Ireland, we have identified and plugged gaps of support that have not been plugged in the rest of the United Kingdom. For example, the limited company directors support scheme has paid out £10.1 million to date. That invaluable scheme filled a recognised gap in the support that we had put together.

With events, weddings and so on, it is clear that the best way to support all those aspects of our economy is to have our economy open, functioning and operating normally. I look forward to 24 May, when I hope that we will see another step change in that reopening and recovery. That is where people want to be, and that is where we must support sectors of the economy.

**Ms Dolan:** The stringent criteria applied by your Department for the recent self-employed scheme excluded those who became self-employed after March 2020. In light of the £2.5 million underspend in this scheme, will you now consider widening the criteria so that more newly self-employed people can receive support?

**Mrs Dodds:** The Member will acknowledge that we looked at the newly self-employed support scheme a number of times and widened and extended the criteria so that the scheme included a wider range of people. We now have around 3,009 applications to that scheme. The 2,481 that have been paid total £8.7 million. That has been an invaluable support to those who were newly self-employed and who missed out on aspects of the core COVID recovery schemes.

As I said to Mr Dickson, the focus now should be for my Department and, indeed, for the House more generally to get the recovery up and running as fast as we can. Today, almost 100,000 people still rely on the furlough scheme for wages in Northern Ireland, and we can reduce that number and stave off a spike in unemployment only if we get the economy open.

**Mr Catney:** How many businesses have had their applications to part A and part B of the COVID restrictions business support scheme rejected?

**Mrs Dodds:** I can write to the Member with the precise figure, but, up to now, we have paid out £83.3 million. Part A has included over 6,000 applications. Some 5,086 of those have been paid. Some have been rejected, and, for some, we are awaiting additional information. I will write to the Member with the specific figure.

For part B, 2,387 applications have been submitted, and 1,551 have been paid. The same reasons apply to those not paid: a lack of information or ineligibility under the criteria.

I commend the staff at Invest NI, who have generally responded very efficiently to queries from Members and the general public. The funding that they have administered and put into the economy through grants stands at around £120 million.

**3.00 pm**

### **Economic Recovery Action Plan: Update**

3. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the economic recovery action plan. (AQO 2006/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** Mr Deputy Speaker, I ask for your indulgence in allowing me an additional minute to answer the question; it is fundamentally important as we go forward. I thank my

colleague for his question. Since I launched my economic recovery action plan on 25 February, I have been successful in securing an additional £286.8 million in 2021-22 to deliver it. On 21 April, my Department hosted a virtual stakeholder event to continue the discussion on recovery. Partnership and collaboration are key to the successful delivery of the actions that are set out in the plan. On 30 April, I announced further details of the high street stimulus scheme and the holiday at home voucher scheme. Both those schemes are cornerstones of the plan. The timing of their delivery will help to maintain the recovery momentum that has started with the reopening of businesses across Northern Ireland.

On the green economy agenda, I have published the options consultation on a new energy strategy. That includes progressing key actions relating to renewable energy, energy efficiency, the hydrogen economy and green innovation. On the skills agenda, pilot activity has commenced to test how the flexible skills fund could be utilised to support upskilling. The development of additional upskilling and reskilling interventions is also under way. That is particularly important when we consider the number of people who are still on furlough or still have their employment supported through the self-employed scheme.

I will continue to work hard to deliver the themes that are set out in the plan. It is worth indicating to the House that an additional £31 million has been allocated to skills, education and support, and an additional £10 million has been allocated for university research and development. There is £145 million for the high street stimulus scheme; £2 million for the holiday at home voucher scheme; £20 million for advertising and marketing for tourism and hospitality; and £17 million for tourism support programmes. There is an additional £15 million to maximise Invest NI's external growth opportunities; an additional £1 million for cross-border programmes; an additional £6 million to support air connectivity; and an additional £3 million for innovation and digital innovation. An additional £3.5 million will be available for entrepreneurship, including support for SMEs.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the additional time.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Minister for that detailed update and for taking the time to visit Londonderry Chamber of Commerce very recently. A key element of the Minister's economic recovery plan is the high street voucher scheme. Will she provide a bit more

detail about that scheme, which we hope will provide a stimulus to our high streets?

**Mrs Dodds:** Yes. It was good to visit the city. We had a lovely day and saw some really innovative plans to take the city forward, including innovation at Catalyst and the new environmental scheme down on the lough shores. I was really encouraged.

As I indicated, £145 million has been guaranteed for the high street stimulus scheme. We are now proceeding with the procurement and implementation of that scheme. We have also undertaken research that will give us an evidence base for the best time to roll out that scheme. It appears that, in order to encourage spending after the summer months and the initial pent-up demand that we see in the shops now, the end of the summer or the beginning of autumn is the best time to roll that out. It will be a prepaid card worth £100, and every adult over 18 will be eligible to apply. The only stipulation is that it must be used in bricks-and-mortar businesses in Northern Ireland, not online. It is what it says in its title: it is about stimulating business on the high street and supporting the retail sector, which has suffered enormously during the COVID pandemic.

**Dr Archibald:** I also want to ask about the high street voucher scheme, because half of the funding for economic recovery is going towards that scheme. We heard about it from officials at last week's Economy Committee meeting, but they were not able to confirm what the voucher could be spent on, where it could be spent or what its economic impact would be. Given what you have said, Minister, about the timescale for delivering it — at the end of the summer, hopefully — are you confident that it will be ready to be rolled out at that time?

**Mrs Dodds:** Work is already well-advanced on procurement of the provider for the cards. I hope that we will be able to deliver the scheme at the end of the summer or the beginning of autumn. Furthermore, I want to have time over the summer to work with local chambers, towns and businesses, because we want the scheme to support local high streets. It is not about the online shops but about the bricks-and-mortar high street. It is about people from our communities who have invested in their businesses and who, last year, were probably closed longer than they were open. We will be sending out a very strong "shop local" message with the high street voucher scheme. We will be working extensively with groups of people, even those who are hard to reach and who may find

it difficult to access the scheme, in order to ensure that it is open and available to everyone.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I want to touch on the high street voucher scheme as well. There are many variables involved. Has your Department done an impact assessment of how the scheme is going to benefit the overall economy? How will we recognise whether it has been a success or a failure? I do not suspect that it will be a failure, but how we do measure its success? If your Department has done such an assessment, will you publish it?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** There are a number of questions in there.

**Mrs Dodds:** The scheme has clearly caught the imagination of not only people in Northern Ireland but a wide variety of people in Scotland and elsewhere, who have approached me about it. We have completed a business case for the scheme, and we will then carry out an impact assessment. Where similar schemes have been rolled out, however, it is absolutely clear from the data that they have increased spend on the high street. We must remember that, by the end of August and the beginning of September, we will see the end of the furlough scheme, at which stage there will potentially be greater difficulties for the economy. We want to continue to stimulate the high street throughout the autumn and into Christmas. We hope that there will be a multiplier effect from the scheme so that, if they get £100, people will purchase items that cost more than that, and we also hope that the scheme will encourage them to continue to support local shops and businesses in local towns.

## Centenary of Northern Ireland

4. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on plans to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland. (AQO 2007/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for her question, which is timely and very important. As we mark the centenary of Northern Ireland, the Department will use it as a time to reflect on our past successes as a small country, where we led the world in shipbuilding, rope-works and linen production, and look at where we are now. We are global leaders in cybersecurity, tech start-ups and fintech and have a creative industries sector that produces TV programmes and films that are broadcast across the world.

The qualities that marked our industrial endeavour in the past — innovation,

determination and vision — are still very much evident today, and we have seen that in abundance over the past year, as businesses pivot, repurpose production lines or step up to provide much-needed materials as part of our response to the challenges of the pandemic.

This has been a difficult year for Northern Ireland, and the centenary gives us an ideal platform on which to showcase everything that is great about Northern Ireland and why it is a great place in which to live, work and invest. It can also act as a springboard for economic recovery.

Despite the ongoing restrictions in some parts of the globe, we have an ambitious series of events scheduled, including an international investment conference here at the beginning of next year. Invest NI, Tourism Ireland and NI Screen all have a series of events to mark the centenary and give us standout from other regions.

As we build our second century, I look forward to working with stakeholders from across Northern Ireland to help to shape our future economy and create a place that is attractive to investors, is recognised globally, and creates opportunities at home for people from all backgrounds and communities across Northern Ireland.

**Miss McIlveen:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she confirm whether any bids were made for funding to mark the centenary? Will she outline what her priorities are for Northern Ireland as we build for its second century?

**Mrs Dodds:** My Department made bids to the Department of Finance as part of the NDNA process. We have not heard from the Department of Finance about those bids. However, we have identified funds in the Department that we will use, along with those from the Northern Ireland Office, to fund the investment conference and the work that we will do to showcase Northern Ireland. As we celebrate Northern Ireland's centenary and move into its second century, I want the economy to be one of innovation and inclusion, and, as I said in my first answer, I want this to be a place where people feel at home and feel that they can have a prosperous and settled life.

**Mr Allister:** The Minister said that bids had been made. A couple of weeks ago, the Finance Minister told me in the House that he could recall no bids from any Department to

mark the centenary, so can the Minister elaborate on what bids were made and to what extent and, indeed, what funds have been set aside in her Department to mark the centenary?

Does she agree that it is beyond shameful that, here in the seat of government, there will not be so much as a rose bush to mark the centenary, such is the bigotry of Sinn Féin?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Member has asked the Minister a question.

**Mrs Dodds:** On the last part of your question, I think that the coverage that I read in the papers over the weekend was petty and, indeed, not worthy of people who claim that they want an agreed Ireland for everyone to live in. It appears that it is only for certain folks who conform to what is required. If we are to make this place home, we need to make it a place where we can all live, work and express our identity.

I have made bids to the Minister. They were part of the NDNA process, and there was a series of bids in relation to NDNA. I have identified funding in my Department that I will use, alongside funding that we have secured from the Northern Ireland Office, for the investment conference, which is hugely important as we take the Northern Ireland economy forward.

I have been working with the Northern Ireland Office to increase Northern Ireland's footprint globally. We have secured more funding, which brings it up to about £8 million, to have Northern Ireland represented in growing economies across the world so that we can make the connections that help us to develop the economy. Our arm's-length bodies in Invest NI and NI Screen also have a series of events coming up. Of course, one of the important things that I want to revitalise is Northern Ireland's ambassador programme across the world. Many of the people who come here to invest do so because they have a personal connection or know someone with a personal connection. Therefore we want to utilise the ambassador programme right across the world. I look forward to rolling those out.

Of course, everyone in the House will recognise that, —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Minister's time is up.

**Mrs Dodds:** Sorry; just one second.

— with COVID and the restrictions, that that has been difficult in a difficult year.

**3.15 pm**

**Mr O'Toole:** We will not agree on the exact nature of what we are commemorating and celebrating with the centenary, but, going forward, I certainly want to see maximum investment and maximum opportunity in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister, therefore, agree, given that she has talked about an investment conference, that the best way to celebrate the duality and unique nature of this place is to highlight, at that investment conference, our access to both the UK and EU markets of half a billion people via the Northern Ireland protocol? Will she commit —?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Member has asked his question.

**Mr O'Toole:** Will she commit to instructing Invest NI to maximise that opportunity?

**Mrs Dodds:** We may not agree on the centenary of Northern Ireland, but I think that we should and can all agree that we want a place that is prosperous for all our people. We are already working on some elements of the investment conference that we are going to do at the start of the year, and there is a little taster of one that we will do in London at the end of this year. That is really important. The Member must realise that investors come to Northern Ireland for a very wide range of reasons, and that includes the skills of our people, the cost base in Northern Ireland, the standard of living and the standard of education. It is for all those reasons that they come to Northern Ireland to invest, not just one single element of it. Of course, we have to be absolutely clear that investors come where they have strong supply chains and that, if those supply chains are broken by the protocol, that is a problem as we go forward.

## Project Stratum

5. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for the Economy how many premises have been provided with a full broadband connection through Project Stratum. (AQO 2008/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for his question and, indeed, for his very obvious interest in this issue. Project Stratum is the largest telecommunications infrastructure project undertaken by my Department and will utilise public funding, secured under the

confidence-and-supply agreement, together with Fibus Networks's investment, to deliver gigabit-capable broadband infrastructure to more than 76,000, primarily rural, premises across Northern Ireland. Following contract award in November 2020, the deployment of infrastructure commenced immediately. Work is under way in the first five deployment areas: Coalisland, Killyleagh, Ballycastle, Kilkeel and Castlewellan. Indeed, I had the great pleasure of talking to people in Coalisland who have been the first to be connected through this project.

To date, Fibus Networks has completed work on some 1,041 premises through Project Stratum, with more premises to benefit from access to improved broadband services shortly. Fibus Networks has a target of connecting approximately 19,500 premises in 2021 and is on track to achieve this. The Member will be hugely interested to hear that, in Newry and Armagh, 8,101 premises will be connected under Project Stratum. When this is complete, that will mean that 99.5% of his constituency will have access to superfast broadband.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** That ends our period for listed questions. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

## Workers' Rights: NDNA Commitment

T1. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister for the Economy, given that New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) contains commitments on workers' rights, including ways to create decent jobs that give workers a meaningful voice and input into government policy development, how she will ensure that that commitment is delivered on, in cooperation with trade unions and workers' representatives. (AQT 1281/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for her question. This morning, I signed off the final draft of the first piece of legislation that we will do in this House around rights for workers. That is the parental bereavement leave Bill. I hope that this will be agreed at the Executive this week and will reach the Floor of the House very quickly. It is hugely important in giving parents statutory rights in such a difficult situation.

The Department is also working on another, wider range of measures around employment rights and looking at many of the issues that have come to the fore over the last year. They include things like the practice of hire and fire, which is quite wrong. Employers should take the time to explain what they need to do and, if

they need to restructure, do that without impacting on workers' rights. We will be bringing measures that will cover a wider range of employment rights as soon as we get the first piece of legislation through, which is the parental bereavement leave.

**Ms Dolan:** I thank the Minister for her answer. News of the parental bereavement leave is very welcome. On the issue of hire and fire, will she commit to bringing forward legislation to end this disgraceful exploitation of workers?

**Mrs Dodds:** As I indicated, it is not a practice that many in the House would support. We want to see people treated fairly, in line with the conditions that they have signed up to in their workplace. Right now, if anyone feels that they have been treated unfairly or illegally, I advise them to seek advice through either the Law Centre or the Labour Relations Agency. It is important that we protect everyone in society. As I said, I am also working on a wider range of employment issues, and these will come to the House in due course.

## **EU Single Market: Maximised Accessibility**

T2. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for the Economy, after welcoming the news about the parental bereavement leave Bill, whether she will introduce a strategy to maximise our unique access to the EU single market and our ability to continue to sell goods to that market, given that, in a response last week, the Minister stated that Invest NI had identified over 30 potential inward investment opportunities since the beginning of the year, which is a significant number. (AQT 1282/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** As I said in a previous answer, investors come to Northern Ireland for a wide variety of reasons. It can be about the standard of living or the skills of our people. Many investors whom I have spoken to as they come to Northern Ireland talk about that collaboration between university and business that is so important to the future of the economy. Many come because of the clusters of innovation that we now have in our economy. It is not just about one thing; it is about the whole offering that the Northern Ireland economy makes.

In relation to the protocol, we must absolutely sort out the damage that it is doing to supply chains and businesses. I write weekly to Lord Frost about the difficulties that they encounter in their trade from GB to NI.

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Minister for her response. I am sure that we would all like to see the challenges posed to businesses by Brexit resolved as quickly as possible.

A recent report from the Federation of Small Businesses in Britain showed that 10% of businesses surveyed were looking for warehousing space in the North. Last week, Manufacturing NI published a survey that showed that nearly half of businesses wanted the Executive to identify and secure new opportunities for them. Do you accept that there is a need for a coordinated strategy to support businesses in responding to the challenges that they face because of Brexit and also to maximise potential opportunities under the protocol?

**Mrs Dodds:** Of course, many of the difficulties that businesses encounter are not because of Brexit but because of the protocol. They are because parties in this House voted for, and stridently asked for, the rigorous implementation of that protocol, even though 75% of businesses in the same survey acknowledged that they had difficulties with their supply chains and businesses in GB. We really need to look at the whole picture for investment in Northern Ireland, and we need to offer people a holistic view of what Northern Ireland has to offer. I hope that the Government are listening and continue to listen, and that the EU will stop its stubborn trajectory of punishing Northern Ireland and not helping as it claimed, so many times in the past, that it was willing to do.

## **Tourism: GB Market**

T3. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for the Economy, after welcoming today's launch of the necessary holiday at home tourism campaign, whether she agrees that we need to see, at the very least, travel opened up across the common travel area, with our tourism sector allowed to begin marketing Northern Ireland in key GB sectors. (AQT 1283/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I absolutely agree with the Member on that point. Today, I launched the Northern Ireland tourism campaign for the summer. Realistically, we know that the vast majority of the business that will come to our hotels and hospitality sector will be from the home market. That campaign will encourage people to explore Northern Ireland and to get out and about and maybe see things that they have forgotten about or lost contact with over the past number of years. I very much hope that that campaign is successful.

However, there will not be enough business in Northern Ireland to sustain our economy or to grow tourism if we rely only on the home market. Therefore, it is very strange that we are the only part of the United Kingdom that has health guidance that suggests that if someone comes here, they have to isolate for 10 days. It is guidance, but, nevertheless, it is impossible to go into the GB market with a tourism campaign while having such guidance in place. I discussed that with Executive colleagues, and I look forward to Northern Ireland being treated equally across the common travel area and certainly across the rest of the United Kingdom. That is important for business.

**Miss McIlveen:** I thank the Minister for her response. Given the rates of infection here in comparison with those on the mainland, what does the Minister believe to be the rationale for restricting travel across the common travel area?

**Mrs Dodds:** Again, I discussed that with colleagues. Northern Ireland has a low infection rate but a comparatively higher rate than that in England, Scotland or Wales. Therefore, that cannot be the reason for restricting travel from GB to Northern Ireland. Of course, we are wary of and want to be protected from some of the COVID variants that we have heard about, but, again, many of those variants are already in the Republic or in Scotland, England and Wales, yet the infection rates in GB are lower.

We cannot continue with that situation. For the sake of our people and of allowing family and friends to visit and businesses to grow and to get us into the GB market with a good campaign for the summer, we need to review that across the common travel area.

## Holiday at Home Voucher Scheme

T4. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for the Economy what she will implement to ensure that the recently announced holiday at home vouchers will be equality assessed, given that, in her recent announcement about the vouchers, she stated that they will be allocated on a first come, first served basis. (AQT 1284/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** I am absolutely adamant that we support tourism and hospitality because of the dramatic and terrible impacts that COVID has had on that part of our economy. Over 70,000 jobs are at stake in that part of the economy. Many of them are part-time and done by women or young people who do part-time hours to support themselves at college and so on.

I have a number of schemes in my economic recovery action plan to support that sector. The holiday at home voucher scheme is one. There is a budget of £2 million for the scheme. That is, obviously, a finite amount of money, and when it is done, it is done. Therefore, it will be allocated on a first come, first served basis. I hope that people will be able to avail themselves of it and that, like the high street stimulus scheme, it will continue to stimulate demand in that part of the economy so that we can continue to help it to recover.

I remind the Member that we have allocated £20 million for advertising and marketing and £17 million for other tourism support programmes. That, along with the money in the city deals, which will be a medium-term objective of tourism's recovery, mean that, once again, we will get to the high watermark that we achieved in 2019.

## 3.30 pm

**Mr McHugh:** I thank the Minister for her answer, but I am still not convinced that a system is in place to ensure that the scheme is equality assessed. Notwithstanding that, the Minister has selected a number of tourist attractions and accommodation providers that will be part and parcel of the voucher scheme. How will the Minister ensure that the impact of the scheme is spread fairly throughout the Six Counties? I am thinking in particular of my region, west Tyrone, where many an attractive site would benefit from the scheme.

**Mrs Dodds:** The objective of the scheme is to try to spread the tourism offer and therefore the benefit from tourism. Obviously, it will have a dramatic impact on the north coast, the Fermanagh lakelands and maybe in south Down and other more well known areas, but it is available to everyone and every part of Northern Ireland. It is part of the recovery of not just tourism and hospitality but the overall economy. It is part of the aim and objective of our economic recovery action plan and what we are trying to do to ensure that we have a regionally balanced economy in which everyone can prosper.

## Project Stratum: Problems

T5. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister for the Economy how she will address an issue across the North that arose at a recent meeting with Fibus, the provider of Project Stratum, and which people in her constituency have made her aware of, in that users have been left out of the scheme either because Land and Property

Services (LPS) did not confirm that a property was occupied or because inaccurate speeds were given to the Department or the provider, with people being told they were getting over 30Mb when, in some cases, they were not getting even 2Mb. (AQT 1285/17-22)

**Mrs Dodds:** That is hugely important for the people who have been excluded from the targeted intervention area and for those for whom we received incorrect data from Land and Property Services. We are working on the issue. We are trying to identify additional funding within the state aid envelope that we have for the scheme to ensure that we can bring more people into the target area and to make sure that we are not excluding anyone. The Department is working on those important issues. It is a massive scheme — the largest infrastructure project that has been undertaken in Northern Ireland. The scheme was made possible through confidence-and-supply funding of £165 million, with additional investment from Fibus adding to its value. It is exciting that, at the end of the project, Northern Ireland will have one of the most advanced networks in Europe.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** That concludes the period for topical questions. Before we return to the Climate Change Bill, I ask Members to take their ease for a few minutes as we change the top Table.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

## Assembly Business

### Standing Order 10(3A): Extension of Sitting

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notification from the Business Committee of a motion to extend the sitting past 7.00 pm under Standing Order 10(3A).

*Resolved:*

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 10 May 2021 be extended to no later than 8.00 pm. — [Ms Bailey.]*

## Private Members' Business

### Climate Change Bill: Second Stage

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill [NIA 19/17-22] be agreed.*

**Mr Speaker:** The sitting may now extend to 8.00 pm, should it be necessary. By then, the debate will have had over six hours of plenary time, which is plenty of time for the balance of opinion to be expressed and party strengths recognised. The Business Committee and I have, therefore, agreed that the Minister will be called no later than 7.00 pm, the sponsor of the Bill no later than 7.30 pm and the Question put no later than 8.00 pm. I hope that all contributors yet to speak will facilitate this approach.

**Mr Blair:** I begin by thanking Clare Bailey and her team for taking the lead on this matter on behalf of concerned Members. I also commend Climate Coalition Northern Ireland for its experience, expertise and dedication to the Bill, and I thank it for its research and preparation and for keeping Members informed throughout the drafting process. Those of us who have been involved closely with the Climate Coalition will be forever grateful for its contribution and dedication.

Much of the Bill's detail has been discussed in the opening and subsequent speeches. Without going into all the detail, it is worth pointing out that, thus far, it has been a most constructive debate.

The Bill was brought forward when there was no movement on the introduction of a long-overdue and increasingly urgent climate change Act, and, in the context that Northern Ireland is the only region of these islands not to have such an Act and associated frameworks, something had to be done. Quite simply, such a situation could no longer be tolerated or defended.

Emerging from the catastrophic coronavirus crisis, our immediate priority must be how to avoid further disasters. Like with the pandemic, all of us will feel the impact of climate change, but we will not all feel it equally. The pandemic has laid bare the injustices and weaknesses in our society and economy. We have seen the damage caused by Governments acting too slowly, from having chronically underfunded public services and through the taking of

flawed, short-term and self-serving decisions. We simply cannot make those same mistakes when tackling the climate crisis.

Industrialised nations such as the UK — there are others, of course — disproportionately bear responsibility for climate change, and millions are already suffering the impacts. Millions of people across the globe are immediately threatened. Climate change is destroying livelihoods, infrastructure and communities, forcing people from their homes, towns and countries. The UN Refugee Agency reported that, in 2019, weather-related hazards triggered 24.9 million displacements in 140 countries. That does not even include people forced to flee their homes as a consequence of slow-onset environment degradations such as droughts, sea-level rise and melting permafrost.

It is estimated that there could be between 25 million and one billion people on the climate change front line who will be forced to leave their homes by 2050. The crisis will only increase in magnitude if immediate action is not taken to reduce carbon emissions rapidly. Right here in Northern Ireland, we can and must play our part.

As a member of the Agriculture Committee, I feel that it is pertinent to address the concerns raised by the agri-food sector that have been much mentioned today. Along with Alliance Party colleagues, I have met the Ulster Farmers' Union on the matter, so we are acutely aware of the union's concerns and of the huge efforts being made by farmers to tackle environmental challenges.

The agriculture sector is our greatest ally in tackling the crisis. As was outlined recently in my party's policy document 'Alliance Green New Deal':

*"Our farmers play an essential role in driving nature's recovery, and matters like cattle grazing and hedgerow maintenance are critical to protecting our wildlife and biodiversity. Across Ireland, climate and soil mean we depend on a grass-based industry."*

We are very aware of that. Our native grass and trees are crucial for carbon sequestration. The policy document adds:

*"Nevertheless, much can and must be done to make the industry more sustainable."*

It continues:

*"With around 25,000 farms in Northern Ireland, most of which are small and family-run, the Alliance Green New Deal will support our farmers in embracing environmentally beneficial farming practices, reducing their carbon footprint, and better using and protecting natural resources and biodiversity."*

In fact, I am, with AERA Committee colleagues, working with the Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN) on a motion to protect our natural environment and tackle the climate emergency while providing a profitable future for the sector. The issue of future agriculture policies, which I raised recently in Assembly questions, must enable a transition whilst providing nutritious food and increased farm resilience. Farmers contributing to sequestration and taking valuable actions to assist in the battle against climate change must therefore be assisted. We need new and better ways of rewarding them for their efforts as they continue to make progress.

I said this earlier, and it is worth repeating: the Climate Change Bill is not sector-specific. All sectors have a major part to play in tackling our carbon emissions. My colleagues Paula Bradshaw and Andrew Muir will refer to other sectors when they speak in the debate later.

Returning to the issue of COVID-19, I hope that all Departments and sectors work together to protect the environment, as well as to protect existing jobs and bring forward new green jobs. The Alliance Party is committed to a green and just recovery and to an urgent and radical overhaul of the policies and practices that have hindered our progress to date.

With that in mind, it should be said that the Bill, and its subsequent outworkings, should not and cannot be about whose idea it was first, whose policy it most closely embeds or who made additional proposals in the first instance. If there is any issue on which we can and should share vision and ambition and exhibit a determination to move forward, surely safeguarding the future of our planet is that issue.

As a co-sponsor of the Bill, I will be supporting this stage of the Bill along with Alliance Party colleagues. We encourage others to do the same in order to progress these urgent matters for the good of our people and for our future.

**3.45 pm**

**Mr Harvey:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate. The DUP is committed to addressing climate change and ensuring that

this part of the United Kingdom plays its role in reducing emissions. I am a firm believer that, as custodians of our planet, we all have a moral and civic responsibility to care for the environment and to do all that we can to create safer and healthier spaces to live in and to enjoy.

As has already been said, tackling climate change is a commitment of 'NDNA':

*"The Executive will introduce legislation and targets for reducing carbon emissions in line with the Paris Climate Change Accord"*

through the bringing forward of legislation to:

*"give environmental targets a strong legal underpinning."*

I am aware that Minister Poots has been working on a climate change Bill that is in the final stages of drafting and has been awaiting approval for discussion by the Executive for a number of weeks. Given that 'NDNA' makes it clear that it is for the Executive to introduce legislation, given that the Minister has brought proposals to the Executive and given the urgency with which other parties wish to address the issue, I cannot understand why the matter has not so much as been discussed by the Executive. I find it bizarre that parties that tell us that there is a climate emergency have not even been able to find time to discuss the Agriculture Minister's Bill.

Regardless of where the Bill originates, the same core issues are at play, including the need to get a robust legislative framework that underpins environmental targets that, though ambitious, are achievable and do not require us to bankrupt our business community. On that point, I echo the sentiments of Manufacturing NI, which warned the House to be careful not to destroy jobs and livelihoods by failing to strike the right balance. I have concerns that the Bill does not strike that balance. I come to that view on the basis of the direction provided by the Climate Change Committee, the independent body tasked by the Assembly and the other UK Administrations to advise on this important issue. In its recent recommendations on Northern Ireland, it commented:

*"In every scenario for achieving UK Net Zero that we have constructed, Northern Ireland would not get to Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050."*

It also commented:

*"An 82% reduction in all greenhouse gases in Northern Ireland represents equivalent effort and a fair contribution to the UK Net Zero target."*

This Bill proposes a target of net zero by 2045. That is something that the Climate Change Committee has said is not only impossible but is unnecessary for ensuring that the UK's climate change targets are achieved.

It is evident that the Bill gives little thought to the impact that a net zero target will have on farm businesses and the wider agri-food sector. Northern Ireland is a significant net exporter of agri-food products, with nearly 50% of agri-food products produced in Northern Ireland being consumed in the rest of the UK. It is only fair, therefore, that other parts of the UK that have a lesser focus on food production bear a heavier burden in meeting the UK target. The Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) regularly reminds us that NI farmers feed 10 million people in the UK. Any climate change legislation from the House must acknowledge that.

As has already been said, we must get the balance right. That is pivotal. Unachievable targets are of use to no one. We must tackle climate change head-on, but it cannot be at too high a price; otherwise, we will have achieved nothing.

**Dr Archibald:** I am really pleased to speak in this important debate. I commend those who have worked hard to progress the Bill, particularly Climate Coalition NI and the parties across the Assembly that have supported it to this stage. I am proud that my first motion of this term of the Assembly, when it was re-established last January, was to declare a climate emergency. We worked with the mover of the Bill and her party to table that motion. A collaborative approach is entirely the right approach and the only way that we can deal with the existential issue of our time.

There is no doubt that we face a climate emergency and a biodiversity crisis. Across the globe, there are some acute impacts being caused by climate change, including melting polar ice caps; increased ocean temperature and acidity; increased sea levels; deaths from weather events; droughts and famines; disease; more people being forced into climate refuge, as referenced by Mr Blair; and threats to global food security. The impact is also clearly being experienced locally, with more extreme weather events. Mr McAleer mentioned wind and flooding in his constituency, and my constituency was also impacted by the flooding in the Sperrins. We have also seen wildfires

over the past couple of weeks in the Mourne. This year alone, we have had the driest and frostiest April and the coldest May Day on record.

The 2019 'State of Nature' report by RSPB outlined that 11% of species on the island of Ireland faced extinction. In the UK, 41% of species have declined since 1970, with 26% of species found in fewer places. That is the reality of what is happening around us and what will continue and worsen without action now.

In 2016, 197 parties signed up to the Paris Accord, a binding agreement that brings all nations into common cause to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects. More than five years on, we are the only part of these islands without specific climate legislation. In January 2020, in 'New Decade, New Approach', the parties committed to bringing forward a climate change Act. Unfortunately, despite it being a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach' and the expressed will of the Assembly, the AERA Minister dragged his feet on taking the action necessary to bring forward climate legislation, and so the other parties collaborated with NGOs and activists to bring forward the Bill that we debate today.

Only then did the AERA Minister belatedly publish a discussion document to bring forward a Bill through his Department, and, disappointingly, those proposals could best be described as unambitious and somewhat leading in terms of how they were written. In that document, there is no serious discussion about how an Act would operate as an overarching framework to adhere to when creating legislation. Only basic lip service is paid to the idea of a just transition. A green new deal is not even mentioned, and, most worryingly, the proposals do not address the fact that we are an island and that these are all transboundary issues. It seems like the bare minimum, and given that the Minister has previously denied that there is a climate emergency, one can only surmise that that is why there is a complete lack of ambition in his proposals. It would have been much better if the Minister had chosen to work with the proposers of this Bill in a constructive way. Unfortunately, it seems that he has sought to undermine it rather than engaging, and the approach is somewhat disappointing, given that his office covers environment and rural communities also.

The progression of this Bill is an opportunity to have a really informed debate and discussion about the type of action that is required and

how we plan to deliver on ambitious, fair and achievable decarbonisation targets together. We have the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of the Government in the South, who did not engage properly with the rural community and where there is some disillusionment with the actions that are being imposed or are seen as being imposed on communities there. Over the past couple of weeks, like every other MLA, I am sure, I have received dozens of emails both supporting and expressing concern about the Bill. I thank all those who have taken the time to correspond with me. There is no doubt that there is huge support for the Bill and for climate action.

Almost all the emails that I received expressing concerns about the Bill have been from our farming community, and they are genuine concerns. I am from a largely rural constituency. I am a former member and Chair of the AERA Committee. I worked for almost 15 years in agri-food research, and I worked alongside the industry. I know its importance. I have talked to farmers about climate change. Not only do they understand it, they want to play their part, and many already do so. They are the custodians of our land, and, given that 75% of land in the North is managed for agriculture, there is much that they will contribute in delivering the action that is needed. Our farming community is and will continue to be at the coalface of the impact of climate change. Weather events that devastate land and crops; increased incidences of plant and animal pathogens, including new plant and animal diseases and pathogens being found to occur in regions where they did not occur previously; and altered growing seasons: all those things will impact on the profitability of our farmers and agri-food producers. Importantly, it also affects our food security and our ability to feed ourselves sustainably. Our farmers, like all communities, must be supported.

That means financially and in developing innovative practices and knowledge transfer to be the most sustainable that they can be.

It is not just by reducing our emissions that we will deliver on the greenhouse gas reduction required; it is by expanding our carbon sinks. Again, our farming and rural communities have much to contribute and must be supported in delivering afforestation programmes of native trees and hedgerow management that will not only act as carbon sinks but support and improve our biodiversity. Those things need to be part of the discussion and central to the action plans being developed.

Sinn Féin is completely committed to ambitious climate action: it is necessary. Inaction and half measures are not an option at this point. As it stands, we are on our way to a 3° or 4° increase on pre-industrial temperatures, which will be catastrophic for our planet. Limiting temperature increase to 1.5° will be a significant challenge and will require radical action.

Every time I have spoken on the climate and biodiversity crises and the need for action, I have emphasised the need for the principles of just transition to be embedded in that action. Climate action has to be based on social justice. It has to be equitable. It has to empower communities. That must be the guiding principle of the climate action that we deliver through the Bill.

Let me assure all those who have expressed their concerns: I hear those concerns. We hear those concerns. The Bill is a hugely positive development, and it should be seen as an opportunity. I have talked about our targets being ambitious: they must be achievable. We must be able to deliver on the targets. That will require investment in financial support for the communities impacted; in technology, research and development and innovation; and in support for businesses and entrepreneurship. It is investment that has the potential to pay off hugely for our local economy, and it must be seen as such.

In 'New Decade, New Approach', we also committed to a green new deal, which has to be core to our economic recovery from COVID. We must seek to positively transform people's lives, rapidly reducing emissions while creating good, decent-paying and secure jobs; delivering warmer homes through retrofitting; tackling fuel poverty; delivering healthier lifestyles and more efficient ways of moving around through investment in our active travel and public transport, world-class digital and physical infrastructure and an abundance of renewable and more affordable electricity from our wind and tidal resources. We must create opportunities for young people and those whose jobs will no longer exist in the way that they did.

The debate today is about the principles of the Bill. It is about moving the Bill forward to Committee Stage, where there will be opportunity for further scrutiny, input and consultation. The Bill creates a climate office and a climate commissioner. The Bill will establish the requirement for a climate action plan within three years of receiving Royal Assent and then every five years. The climate

action plans would have to be approved by the Assembly, and those plans would be subject to public consultation. Nothing is being imposed or done in the scope of the Bill that will not be agreed by the Assembly.

There is scope for development to ensure that the Bill protects communities in achieving the ambitious targets that it sets out and the climate action plans that need to take account of our circumstances. A greater focus on transboundary impacts needs to be developed in the action plans. We are an island, and there needs to be proper account and cooperation across the island.

It is positive that the just transition principles are embedded in the Bill, and there are references in clause 3(8) to reducing inequality and eliminating poverty and social deprivation. I want to see it expressly written into the Bill that achieving the net zero target and the climate action plans must be based on the principles of just transition. It is important that we define what we mean by a just transition. At its simplest, it means that transition to net zero must happen in a fair way that leaves no one behind. A report for the OECD in 2017 stated:

*"A just transition ensures environmental sustainability as well as decent work, social inclusion and poverty eradication."*

In fact, it is set out in the Paris agreement itself: national plans on climate change that include just transition measures with a centrality of decent work and quality jobs. A just transition must be based on social dialogue, as mentioned by Clare Bailey when she moved the Bill, and ensure the type of social interventions needed to secure workers' rights and livelihoods when economies shift to sustainable production to combat climate change and to protect our biodiversity.

The development of the first climate action plan should be informed through the establishment of a just transition commission that involves all partners and representatives of all sections of our society and economy. I would like to see that expressly written into the Bill.

#### 4.00 pm

The climate office described in the Bill must have meaningful civic engagement as its modus operandi. The type of radical action that is needed to halt the catastrophic breakdown of our planet will mean change. It will require a major rethink of what prosperity means. The continuing pursuit of profit and capitalist models

of consumption have greatly contributed to the climate breakdown that we face, but we have the power to make change if we act now. We have to be honest with people that change is necessary. We also have to empower our communities and provide reassurance and evidence that climate action will mean job creation and community renewal. We have to lead, and we have to manage change.

I will finish by, first, speaking directly to those who have concerns about what the Bill means for them. We are listening. We believe that the best and only way to effectively tackle the climate emergency is by working in partnership through informed debate and discussion that is designed with communities for communities. The type of climate action that we are talking about cannot be done to our communities. We must have maximum buy-in to the plans that are developed. That is the only way that they will be successful. That is the process that I want to be delivered through the ambitious, achievable and fair climate change legislation. That is what Sinn Féin will be working to ensure as the Bill progresses.

Finally, when I think about the climate emergency, I think of our young people. I think of those young people on the climate strikes who have been motivated to become activists by their desire to save our planet. I think of those kids who get on to their parents about recycling, turning off the lights and walking instead of going in the car. Those young people will inherit the planet that we leave. As political leaders, we have to do not only what is politically expedient but what is right. Protecting our planet for future generations is the very least that we can do. I support the Bill.

**Mr Wells:** It was a bright, sunny day in May 2017. I thought to myself, "I will be environmentally aware. I will not drive from Lurgan to Banbridge; I will take the bus". Off I tootled to my local bus stop in the middle of Lurgan. There he was, the bus driver, reading his newspaper. It was 'The Sun', as it turned out; I will not bring out any jokes from 'The Two Ronnies' here. While he was reading the newspaper, his engine was on. It was a bright, hot day, and, of course, the seating that Translink and Craigavon borough council kindly provided at the bus stop was directly in line with the exhaust pipes of the bus. I sat there as he read his newspaper. Fifteen minutes went by and still his exhaust was going quite merrily. He finished reading his newspaper and folded it. He walked across the street to his bank and withdrew some money. He came back to the bus and started to eat his lunch, still with the engine running. That was half an hour of

exhaust fumes pouring out into the atmosphere. I wrote to Translink about that dreadful waste of energy and taxpayers' money and the resultant carbon emissions. You would think that I was asking for the impossible to suggest to it that it might ask its staff to turn off their engines when they are waiting at bus stops. I have seen that many times since. That is an example of what is going on and of the profligate way in which we use energy.

We do not have to go too far. In this Building, the recording machines for Hansard in the Committee rooms remained on for three years when the Assembly did not meet. Nobody was prepared to go and switch them off. The roof would collapse upon us if we dared to switch off those machines in the three years in which we did not meet. We recorded the hottest day in Northern Ireland's history, and, of course, the heating was on full in the Building on that hottest day. All attempts to get the heating turned off fell flat with no success whatsoever.

The problem is, Mr Deputy Speaker — Mr Speaker, sorry; I have enough trouble with you without calling you Deputy Speaker. The problem is, Mr Speaker, that 24% of the energy that we use in Northern Ireland is wasted; it goes down the plughole. If we could solve that problem, we would not have to burden our farmers with very strict emissions targets.

We would have to do very little to increase our renewable energy demands because we could solve the problem simply by not wasting the stuff that we already produce. Any time that yours truly — an obscure Back-bencher from South Down, who is of no great political import — raises that with any of the authorities, you would think that I was asking for the sun, the moon and the stars. Nobody is prepared to tackle the absolutely basic point that we could utilise now to protect our planet.

Bringing our emissions down to net zero by 2045 will be painful for all of us: industry, private consumers and farmers. We cannot reverse the juggernaut of climate change without huge pain. As the honourable Member for East Londonderry pointed out, however, the consequences of not doing it might be that we do not have an agriculture industry in the future. If we allow our planet to go the way that it is going, we might not be able to produce enough food to feed ourselves in the future.

I do not know how many emails, letters and phone calls I have received about this issue. I suspect that the number is second only to the number that came to me on the debate on abortion. Many people in South Down asked

me to support the Bill, and many people, most of them farmers, asked me not to do so. I suspect that we have all had the same email from the farming community, which, I believe, was instigated by the Ulster Farmers' Union. It is a fact that what we are asking for will produce pain for the farming community, but we have the mechanisms to deal with that.

First, everyone thus far has said that there has to be protection for vulnerable groups by means of a transition to a net zero target. The fallback is that any targets and policies will have to be agreed by the Assembly. Ms Bailey's Bill sets up a framework, but, time and time again, issues will come back to the Assembly for a final decision. The Bill is only at Second Stage. It will go off to the Committee for further consultation and scrutiny. Assembly Committees have been good at dealing with complex Bills. We are often maligned by the public, but, through our ability to ask questions for written answer and, through Committees, to scrutinise Bills, legislation and policies, we have been successful. Nobody will report that in tomorrow's newspapers.

The Bill will go off to the Committee. I have no doubt that the Committee, led by Mr Irwin who is one of its prime spokesmen, will scrutinise every jot and tittle of the Bill and pore all over it. No doubt it will come back to the Assembly in a different shape and form from that in which it entered the Committee. There is an opportunity to deal with the issues and the legitimate concerns of the farming community about the emissions targets.

We have in Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom a unique system of farm support. I still call it the single farm payment, but Mr Irwin, being the guru and the font of all knowledge on the issue, will point out the exact terminology that is now used. The single farm payment is the mechanism that we inherited from the European Union and that we now control for ourselves. That can be used as a mechanism to compensate farmers and to cushion the blow that will undoubtedly occur as a result of the targets.

No matter what Bill we adopt, be it Ms Bailey's or the Minister's — I have no doubt that the Minister's Bill arrived very quickly because Ms Bailey's Bill was coming down the railway line, and, in a rush, the Minister's Bill suddenly appeared as Ms Bailey's Bill was published — there will have to be reductions in emissions from all sectors in Northern Ireland. Some might argue that the Minister's Bill will be less painful than the Green Party's Bill, but it will have to be done. We must take the mechanism that we

already have in place to ensure that we minimise the damage to all sectors as a result of the emissions targets.

I see the single farm payment as a way of allowing farmers to adjust to the new landscape by compensating them through a mechanism that has worked very well. I do not believe that it necessarily means that farmers will be out of pocket, but it will be painful.

We have a resource in Northern Ireland. If we stopped wasting energy — I do not think that we will, because many Northern Ireland people are not happy unless they are wasting energy in some form — that would make a major contribution, but we in Northern Ireland and, indeed, the Irish Republic have a unique resource, which, if properly utilised, would be a much less painful way to deal with this climate change issue. Peat covers 18% of our land. Peat covers only 3% of the land area of the entire world, and yet it stores more carbon than all the other vegetation in the world put together. We have a vast tract of peatland, which, if properly utilised, could form a carbon store of immeasurable consequence. It has been shown that, if you take degraded peatland and restore it by a process known as re-wetting, you can form a carbon sink, which can do so much to reduce emissions from industrial and farming processes.

That begs the question: if 18% of our land is peat, and it is our most valuable tool to sequester carbon, why are we still allowing the destruction of peatlands in Northern Ireland? Why are we still giving planning permission for peat removal, and why are we permitting peatlands to be drained, burned and damaged when we have this essential tool that could save the day? There must be a complete moratorium on all further damage to peatlands immediately. There must be a policy, which is only just starting, to re-wet those peatlands. I am aware of the excellent project on the Garron plateau and of the work at Cuilcagh in Fermanagh. That is a good step forward, but we really need to get our act together to protect this valuable habitat.

Now, of course, Dolores Kelly has tabled a motion for tomorrow that will deal with that issue to a large extent, but I want to make the point that we have two areas where we can immediately take action to reduce emissions — wastage and peatlands — but we are not doing anything about them, and both are an awful lot less painful than imposing restrictions on other parts of our economy.

Finally, Northern Ireland is extremely blessed with a lot of wind and land suitable for solar panels and tree planting. Again, those are much less painful ways to deal with the problem.

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

**Mr Wells:** I certainly will.

**Mr McGuigan:** I listened to the Member intently, and he has used the word "painful" half a dozen to maybe a dozen times during the debate. Does he agree that, when constructing a narrative about climate change, using the word "painful" is doing a disservice to what the Bill is about? Clean energy production, less air pollution, more active travel, more green energy, businesses investing in the future, our children and grandchildren having a much better future: this is not painful, and there are many positives that society will gain from the Bill.

**Mr Wells:** It grieves me to say this, but the honourable Member speaks a lot of sense. Yes, he is absolutely right that there are real rewards for our community when we get to our final goal. There is a healthier environment, less dependency on fossil fuels and less waste of precious resources. However, in order to get from our present position to that holy grail, there will be pain and difficult decisions will have to be made. There will have to be reductions in emissions, and there will have to be compensation —.

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

**Mr Wells:** I certainly will.

**Mr McGuigan:** Does the Member agree with me and my party colleague who spoke before me that it is imperative that there is a just transition so that nobody loses out on this path to net zero?

**Mr Wells:** It grieves me even further to agree with the Member on that point. He is absolutely right.

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

**Mr Wells:** Certainly: this is trouble.

**Mr Allister:** In this situation, is it not a little too simplistic to say that no one loses out, when we know that our agri-food industry will lose up to 50% of its production and that meat eaters, which the Member is not, will find that they are exporting their carbon to import their meat

supplies, which will no longer be supplied locally?

Is it not rather trite to suggest that no one will lose out?

**4.15 pm**

**Mr Wells:** Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right: I am stuck in the middle on my own. The Member makes a point that, I know, is held by many in the farming community. We have a system whereby we can use the mechanisms that we already have to ease the pain — that is where I disagree with the honourable Member to my right — that there will be for some people in this process, and there will be pain. As long as the farming community believes that it is being treated fairly and that, if society demands that it reduce its emissions, society is also prepared to use the mechanism that it already has to compensate farmers for that, the farmers will join us and support us in what we are doing.

What we cannot do, however, is leave the farming community behind, marooned, because, as everyone has said, it has a tremendous role to play — a crucial role to play — as we move to net zero. There is no doubt that we cannot do it without the farming community. The only way in which we will do it with the farming community is to have mechanisms in place to ensure that it does not lead to the massive reduction in farm incomes that the Member mentioned and that we can compensate farmers. It is difficult. It will stretch everybody in the Chamber and on the Committee and, indeed, the Minister to achieve it, but it is the only way forward, if we are to deliver an effective Climate Change Bill.

If anyone had told me when I first came into the Chamber, a very long time ago, that over half of our electricity generation would be achieved through renewables, I would have laughed. It was pie in the sky. It was impossible. That is exactly what we have done. Northern Ireland now has a very high rate of renewable electricity generation, and that is just from wind turbines. We have not scratched the surface of generation from solar panels. I am beginning to see farms start to be developed. I know that the honourable Member for North Antrim has a particular problem in his area. I will get my retaliation in first before he raises the issue. The reality, however, is that Northern Ireland has huge potential for solar energy. Even in our climate, which is not the sunniest, it is amazing what modern technology can now do in order to achieve a high rate of renewable energy. There

is an opportunity there for the farming community.

I will raise the issue of afforestation. One of the best ways in which to control carbon emissions and reduce the amount of carbon in the atmosphere is through tree planting. Again, Northern Ireland is one of the least afforested parts of the United Kingdom and, indeed, in Europe. Vast areas of Northern Ireland could be used for tree planting. Courtesy of the Minister, we already have an attractive system of grants and subsidies that enable farmers to set aside land to plant trees, and the payments are spread over 25 years. Those should be used to a much greater level in order to diversify farm incomes.

I must say how disappointed I am in the Minister and the Department. Last Saturday, I opened 'Farming Life', in which Mr Irwin features at least three or four times every week, and I saw the announcement of a large afforestation project; from memory, I think that it was in County Antrim. It was all well and good — 50 hectares and hundreds of thousands of trees — until I read that half of the trees were to be Sitka spruce. We will get absolutely nowhere in increasing biodiversity and improving the emissions problem in Northern Ireland if we believe that planting exotic, foreign, coniferous trees here will do anything to help the situation. I felt disappointed when I read that. The Minister has announced a major tree-planting programme, but all attempts to tie him down on what proportion of it will be native Irish/Ulster/British trees have failed. They must all be native trees. You cannot increase diversity by going back to the serried ranks of conifers that have marked hillsides so much for many years. That has to stop. We have to go back to the oak, the birch, the sycamore and all those species that, we know, are good for biodiversity and climate change. That penny has not dropped yet. What I am trying to say in my inadequate way is that there are options available that, if we take them now, can turn round the juggernaut of climate change. Those options will have less — I will not say the word "pain", as I have been hauled up already for saying that — they will be less challenging than if we simply leave it too late and end up in a situation where emissions have got out of control.

People may say, "Why should we bother? This is little Northern Ireland, just six counties. We are part of the UK, but, sure, we are only 3% of the population, and our percentage of emissions is just slightly above that". We have two fundamental problems. First, we are part of a big polluter: the UK. The UK has the fifth

largest economy in the world, so we have to be seen to play our part in the overall UK target. Secondly, even though Northern Ireland has a population of only 1.8 million, its emissions are much higher than those of many African countries. In the Sahel region of Africa, you have countries with populations 10 and 15 times higher than the population in Northern Ireland, but their emissions per head are so much lower that their overall contribution to global climate change is very small. Northern Ireland cannot sit back and say, "We'll just forget about this and pass on it"; we have to do something to help lead the world, as Scotland, Wales and the Irish Republic have all done. We have to play our part. We are the only part of the United Kingdom that does not have a climate change Act. That is our first difficulty. Secondly, how can we lecture other countries? How can we say to small, impoverished nations that have very low levels of GDP, "You must take challenging steps to reduce your climate emissions", if we are not prepared to do it ourselves? We simply cannot do that. That is why Ms Bailey is absolutely right to move this Bill and why Mr Poots is absolutely right to move his Bill. Hopefully, between the two, we will arrive at a situation where we play our role.

Mr Allister, the honourable Member for North Antrim, made a rather disparaging comment about vegetarianism. As far as I know, there are only three vegetarians in the Chamber, but just remember this: it takes 16 pounds of grain to produce one pound of meat. I will put it another way: if everybody in the world was vegetarian, we could feed the planet three times over and still have a surplus. We have to face the fact that we have only one planet. To sustain ourselves to the level of the United States or Germany, we would need four planets, and we do not have that option. We have to start thinking about our diet and how we produce food.

The frightening thing is that the only reason that 1.1 billion Indians and 1.4 billion Chinese can survive is that they have a largely plant-based diet. The frightening spectre that we have, as a planet, is of those two huge populations adopting a Western diet with all the energy demands that that entails. If that happens, we really will have a problem. In that scenario, our population could remain static, but we would have two major concentrations of people moving rapidly towards a diet and a lifestyle that is incredibly demanding on our planet. Therefore —

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to focus more on the principles of the Bill. This is the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill. Equally, the

Business Committee, as we announced earlier, has agreed that the Assembly sitting will finish at 8.00 pm. We will call the Minister to respond at 7.00pm, and he has confirmed that he will take only half an hour to speak, as has the sponsor of the Bill. The business will conclude at 8.00 pm. I ask the Member to be understanding of the fact that quite a number of Members still want to speak, but that the sitting will end at 8.00 pm, whatever happens.

**Mr Wells:** I assure you, Mr Speaker, that I will not be speaking at 7.00 pm. I was just about to draw my remarks to a conclusion.

It is good for the Assembly that we are dealing with the issue. I have already heard some very useful contributions from all sides. We should allow the Bill to continue to Committee Stage, where, no doubt, many Members are waiting to get their teeth into it. We can then come back and give it further consideration. By the time that process is finished, knowing the track record of the Assembly, we will have made a major contribution on the issue.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for that.

**Ms Anderson:** Sinn Féin has been consistent on the need for climate justice and for a climate change Act in the North because we are living in the middle of a climate emergency. In Derry and the north-west, we have already seen the impact of severe weather, with flash flooding and, at times, scorching heatwaves and storms that have been battering more relentlessly over the last decade. In August 2017, 70 millimetres of rain — around 63% of the rainfall of August — fell in just nine hours, and homes, businesses, agriculture, infrastructure and habitats were destroyed. Four hundred homes were affected. The A5 was closed for three days. Local farmers lost tens of thousands of pounds due to land damage, and five bridges were completely washed away. Then, in 2018, we had 58 consecutive days without rainfall, straining farmlands, causing water shortages and hospital admissions, not to mention gorse fires raging throughout. Being the only part of these islands without bespoke climate legislation is unacceptable because it is our duty as public representatives and custodians of this land to do everything in our power to keep global temperature increases to less than 1.5° Celsius on the pre-industrial level. If we fail to do that — we will fail if the Bill does not go through, and I welcome the fact that we are discussing the principles of it today — the consequences for our island, our peatlands, our wetlands, our ancient forest and mountain life in all its natural beauty could well face extinction.

My Sinn Féin colleague Declan McAleer spoke about the rural community and farmers, and we have all received emails from farmers, particularly in recent days, who must be consulted and must be listened to so that there is, as has been said, a just transition. I also acknowledge the Sinn Féin spokesperson Philip McGuigan, who has led the Sinn Féin position on climate justice from the front and is a proud co-signatory of the Bill.

The Bill provides a framework for decisive action in the North because we are failing to adequately reduce carbon emissions. When you consider that, between 2008 and 2016, the North managed to reduce emissions by only 9%, you see that that is totally unacceptable. Unless urgent action is taken across this island, we will be on a trajectory for natural disaster, so I urge all the MLAs to vote in favour of sending the Bill to Committee Stage so that its principles can be fully and transparently discussed and considered, as has been outlined today.

The Bill gives us an opportunity to tackle an endless cycle of extraction, under-regulated capitalistic growth and materialism that has brought our planet to the brink. Business as usual is no longer an option. That is why Sinn Féin tabled a motion in February 2020 declaring a climate emergency and why my party colleague Declan McAleer, as Chair of the Agriculture Committee, tabled a motion calling on Minister Poots to introduce a climate change Act. However, Minister Poots continued to drag his boots. He only started to take action when every other party in the Chamber came together to bring forward this Bill, and I acknowledge and congratulate all who were involved in that.

I welcome the fact that the Bill sets out the framework for the creation of a climate action plan to put us on an ambitious trajectory for net zero carbon emissions by 2045. A cornerstone of the Bill is the fact that a climate action plan will be co-designed with sectors, businesses and industries to work to make crucial and fundamental change.

Of course, change can be challenging, which makes it all the more important that we ensure a just transition, as has been referred to today and is outlined in the Bill, so that crucial action to protect our environment does not disadvantage anyone who is already struggling to make ends meet.

**4.30 pm**

The Bill offers us the chance to be ambitious, fair and deliverable and to protect workers, farmers, families and communities by protecting and enhancing our natural world. The climate action plan that is envisaged in the Bill will, without doubt, with reference to energy production and supply, revolutionise our electricity production and consumption, which was mentioned earlier as one of the things that should be taken account of. Currently, as has been stated by other Members, almost half of our electricity in the North comes from renewable sources. As good as that is, it is not enough. The sectoral plans that are envisaged by the Bill should take account of changes that need to be undertaken in, for instance, the transport sector. I know that the Minister has been doing work on all of that. As more hydrogen buses get on the road, we need to have the skills base to maintain them and the ability to fuel them locally. If we do not produce local hydrogen, we will unravel any environmental benefits that are referred to in the Bill by shipping tanks of hydrogen into the North from abroad.

The hydrogen production industry is set to be worth something in the region of £2.5 trillion globally by 2050. That is an opportunity for the Economy Minister, who should not attempt to shunt it into a small corner of the north-east, particularly as the natural geography of Derry and the north-west, including Donegal, is perfectly suited to, and in the perfect location for, the generation of wind energy, which is referred to in the sectoral plans of the Bill and is necessary for the production of hydrogen. I have been centrally involved in showcasing Derry and Donegal to investors; I have exposed to them what the Bill sets out regarding energy production and supply, which is in abundance in the north-west. The Bill sets out the ultimate objective of achieving net zero emissions, and hydrogen opportunities can help to achieve that in Derry, investing in economically sustainable jobs and tackling regional inequalities in the north-west.

In relation to what the Bill says around energy production and supply, I have already initiated conversations with, for instance, Magee university, the Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Derry and Strabane council, Donegal council, the Foyle port and NI Water to help to advance the opportunity for Derry and the north-west city region to capture the all-Ireland opportunities to advance climate justice. In fact, over the past number of months, I have done more for Derry with potential investors than Invest NI has. That would not be too hard, but that is another debate for another day. I know that you will not want me to stray into that.

The bottom line remains that we are at a crossroads. We can choose to do more of the same or to protect our natural world. The longer we dilly-dally over choosing which path to go down, the less of our natural world we will protect. The next stage of the process will be vital in understanding and shaping a climate change Act that will protect people, our ecology and our environment.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the principal sponsor of the Bill for its introduction here today. My party colleague Mark, the Member for Foyle, is a co-sponsor of the Bill. When he was Environment Minister in 2015, he proposed a climate action Bill at the time of the Paris Accord in order to keep the rise in global average temperature to well below 2°C, which is above pre-industrial levels, and to pursue efforts to limit the increase to 1.5°C.

We have an obligation and a responsibility to meet those commitments. The commitment to climate change is a commitment to social justice. The delay in seeing a climate change Bill brought before the Assembly has been because of a number of issues, among them the denial of some Members of the current Environment Minister's party and the absence of an Executive, when members of the deputy First Minister's party walked from the Assembly. Nevertheless, we are where we are today, and, indeed, when the Assembly declared a climate emergency in February last year, the Minister, along with his party, voted against that declaration.

However, as we look at this —

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

**Mr McGlone:** Yes, sure, Jim.

**Mr Wells:** Not all of his party voted against that motion. I was very much in favour of declaring a climate change emergency.

**Mr McGlone:** Thanks very much for your elucidation, Jim. I appreciate that, thank you.

It is good to see the Bill in front of the Assembly today and to see the debate under way. The Bill is unambiguous in its ambitions. It sets down in legislation a commitment to a target of net zero by 2045 compared with 1990 levels and puts in place a framework for the delivery of that target. Some Members will raise the advice of the UK Climate Change Committee. I accept its advice for what it is: it is its expert opinion based on the evidence that is available to it. However, as

the Climate Change Committee has pointed out:

*"there is no purely technical reason"*

why we cannot meet a net zero target for greenhouse gas emissions. As the chair of the Climate Change Committee, Lord Deben, said to the AERA Committee of the advice that the CCC provides, its job is to:

*"make sure that you, as a Government, and the arrangements that you have in the North of Ireland, are such that you can genuinely say to all the people of the Province that you are absolutely able to reach this end".*

He also told the Committee:

*"if you were to decide that you wanted to do better than that, we would be very pleased indeed."*

It is also worth noting that since the CCC appeared before the AERA Committee, the United States and the UK have significantly updated their commitments to much more ambitious targets than before.

The SDLP supports the Bill not only because we want to do better but because we must do better. Reaching net zero by 2045 will not be easy, but it is essential. The latest NI greenhouse gas inventory estimates for 2018 show a 20% decrease in emissions compared with 1990 levels. The current projections estimate only a 39% reduction by 2030 compared with 1990 levels. Agriculture remained the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions for Northern Ireland in 2018, at 27%. The share is expected to increase to 35% in 2030 as a result of the improved performances of other sectors, with only a 3% reduction in agricultural emissions.

That is not sustainable, but there have been many scare stories about what the Bill will do to farmers. I represent a rural constituency, and I have no intention of putting farmers or the agri-food sector out of business. I was really glad to hear the proposer of the Bill, Ms Bailey, say that, from her party's point of view, the Bill does not assign sectoral targets. Parallel to that, however, or as a consequence of it, we would welcome a cross-departmental just transition working group that would not only audit comprehensively the environmental potential but look at the social consequences in terms of food prices etc, the economic and business implications and opportunities as well as the energy implications and changes in the use of

energy, which Mr Wells mentioned. Also, for those of us who live in rural areas, there are big transport implications for that and the necessary requirements for properly funded infrastructure, whether that be electrical or, indeed, changes in the types of existing modes of transport that are being used. I suggest that that working group come up with proposals for government to support and incentivise the various sectors and industries, such as farming, in order to help them to make that transition and to support them through that change.

Change can be welcome, or it can be a challenge. This change is inevitable, because it is needed. I can think of one particular night in 2014 when, at 2.00 am, I was standing in Sandy Braes, which is in an estate in Magherafelt, and we were up to our knees in floodwaters as a result of flash flooding, which had never happened there before. The incident in Glenelly valley, which the Chair knows much better than I do, caused a crisis for a lot of farmers. I have been to Curran, which is a small townland between Maghera and Magherafelt, where the River Moyola burst its banks, and new houses were flooded. That had never happened before. Indeed, last year, the same thing happened with the River Moyola, and a house on River Road in Draperstown that had never been flooded before had 1 metre of water in it. Those incidents are not happening by coincidence. They are being caused by a change that we must stymie and try to stop. That is why the Bill is before us today.

Given the sectors that are affected, the aim must be to maintain the profitability of farms, the agri-food sector and other businesses; to promote new methods and ways that are equally, if not more, sustainable and, indeed, profitable for them; and to encourage the use of less environmentally damaging methods and practices. It would be for the working group to see through that work and bring forward proposals for financial support or other incentivisation for the various sectors.

We need to build social benefits into the reduction efforts so that communities can see it working for them. Bringing communities with us as we reduce greenhouse gas emissions across all sectors — energy, transport, business and agriculture — is key to successfully making the transition to a net zero society. I welcome that the Chair, Mr Declan McAleer, said earlier that the Committee will ensure that there is inclusivity and that all voices will be listened to so that the legislation, in its final form, represents the needs of the community. There are many, many needs, and I was glad to hear the Chair say that.

With a fair and ambitious target in place, we can shape policy to meet that target and put in place support and incentives to help all sectors. We have a responsibility to help to meet the net zero target of not just Britain and the rest of Ireland but the net zero target globally. Importantly, as the Bill works its way through the AERA Committee, the consultation process will be uppermost.

Again, I thank the Bill's sponsor for moving its Second Stage. I welcome working with the Committee and with her as it progresses through the Committee and its various stages.

**Mr Chambers:** I do not believe that many Members, if indeed any, do not recognise that climate change needs urgent attention. It is not just an issue for Northern Ireland. Rather, it is a global topic that requires international action.

Today, the Assembly has the opportunity to debate the issue and to start to find a way forward that attempts to confront and mitigate the problem. However, it is equally important that we do not create legislation that presents severe and perhaps unachievable challenges for any of our citizens, especially those who may have their livelihood curtailed or damaged as a result.

Like others, in recent days, I have received a large number of emails from those in our important agriculture sector. Some were irate; others were very reasonable in setting out the challenges that they might face from any legislation that flows from the Bill as it stands.

The one common theme in all the emails is that everyone recognises that climate change is a reality. It is a reality that we must address in the interests of the welfare of our children and our grandchildren in the future. No one is in denial. The biggest fear expressed in the correspondence that I have received from those in the agriculture sector was about the timelines outlined in the Bill. Suggestions that herd sizes need to be reduced to achieve zero carbon emissions by 2045 are a major concern for the farmers who contacted me.

Many of their concerns are around large investments that they have recently made based on business plans that go beyond the Bill's timeline targets. Others are about to make investments but are concerned that family members who inherit the farm will be left with business plans that start to unravel, creating financial difficulties for them in the future.

**4.45 pm**

I have a background in business, and I understand their concerns and recognise the need for certainty when making long- to medium-term investments. We all rely heavily on the financial support of banks when we embark on such investments in our businesses. The Bill may make banks nervous about long-term lending if there is any suspicion that forward financial and business planning could be disrupted by challenges thrown up by legislation. Some local farmers have called with me personally. Their approaches have been civil and heartfelt. From listening to them, I have been impressed by the steps that they are already taking on their farms to reduce carbon emissions and by how they carry out their work. That has reassured me that I have been engaging with people who are on the same page as the Assembly in recognising the dangerous reality of climate change.

I will support the Bill today because it is the right thing to do for the community that I represent. It is also the right thing to do for my grandchildren and everyone else's grandchildren. However, I have listened to our agriculture sector, and I recognise that some of their concerns are genuine and set firmly in reality. They want to reach the position of a zero carbon emission level. They support our aspiration to achieve that. That said, I believe that meaningful amendments will need to be tabled and timelines revisited as the Bill progresses. We cannot afford to make legislation that will have unforeseen consequences that may damage not only our agriculture sector but other areas of our economy. We must go forward together in common cause, and, to achieve that, we will need those meaningful amendments. I believe that there will be the will in the House to produce legislation that everyone will support and that will be achievable. We need to get this right. To that end, I will give a pledge to our agriculture industry that I will support all amendments to the Bill that will make that sector feel more comfortable with any resulting legislation.

**Mr M Bradley:** I agree wholeheartedly that a Climate Change Bill is necessary and urgent, and I thank my AERA Committee colleague Ms Bailey for introducing the Bill to the Assembly. However, I worry about its impact on the agri-food and farming industry, which will be most affected.

It has been a good debate so far, and I will try not to replicate some of the excellent points that Members have raised. Increasing rainfall, unpredictable storms, landslides and the threat to habitat and species, which was highlighted

recently by the Mourne wildfire, are all warning signs that cannot be ignored. Climate change is the world's most pressing emergency, and I agree that we in Northern Ireland must do our bit to combat rising seas, rising temperatures and unstable weather patterns. We need more than words and lip service. We are in the midst of an emergency, but it is an emergency that needs to be properly funded to ensure that any climate change Bill is a success. That cost has not been factored in as yet.

We need to be part of a joined-up strategy that is properly funded and has measurable outcomes, and that is in line with the rest of the UK and our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland. There are differences regionally in industrial usage. Here in Northern Ireland, agriculture is one of our main industries and employers, and we cannot overlook that industry. Its input is vital. One such measure is the reinstatement of bog and peatlands, and more needs to be achieved quickly on the reforestation of Northern Ireland. Here I agree with my colleague Mr Wells. Where suitable, native broadleaf trees must be planted in preference to coniferous trees.

On renewable energy, whether that be wind farms or solar farms, we need to gravitate away from fossil fuels and use green energy. The Bill heralds a time when all stakeholders need to sit down and discuss a time frame for a strategy on the way forward. We need to involve processors, wholesalers, corporate food retailers, industry and the general public. We also need to look at airlines, both passenger and freight. Burning 5 litres of aviation fuel at 30,000 feet is the equivalent of burning 25 litres on the ground, yet many of us cannot wait to get away on holidays. A societal change is also necessary.

In addition, the shipping and corporate haulage industries use massive amounts of fossil fuel, with too much of it used to bring beef and dairy products into Northern Ireland, while we export up to 80% from Northern Ireland. Burning home heating oil, gas and coal across Northern Ireland and having fossil-fuel vehicles that produce the worst emissions possible damage our environment.

Although I support having a climate change Bill, I would rather wait until the Minister's Bill is brought before the House. To that end, I encourage the Executive Committee to grant its introduction as soon as possible. I believe that it has been with the Executive Committee for the past four weeks. I fear that having two separate Bills on climate change will be counterproductive. I therefore prefer to wait until

the Minister's climate change Bill can be heard, in order to see which better benefits all of us in Northern Ireland or to see whether the two Bills can complement each other. It is too important not to look at all the issues.

We are in the middle of an emergency. If we do not take stock now, it will be our children and our children's children who will suffer the consequences.

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Bill's main sponsor, Clare Bailey, for bringing it to Second Stage. It is a privilege to be a named co-sponsor of this important Bill on behalf of my party, and I am delighted to speak today in its favour.

I point out the broad, cross-party support for the Bill and its desired outcomes. This progressive Bill is a good example of MLAs in this institution cooperating. Indeed, it is an excellent example of cooperation between MLAs and civic society.

As politicians, there are many vital and important issues deserving of our attention. We are still dealing with the effects of a global pandemic. We are trying to keep our citizens safe and well as we move towards reopening society, and building back our economy must be an immediate priority. Rebuilding our health service, tackling inequalities in education, boosting our economy, dealing with Brexit-related issues, progressing and shaping positive and progressive politics towards a shared future on this island and many more vital issues also require our attention, now and in the time ahead. There can be absolutely no doubt, however, that the defining political issue for this generation, on this island and beyond, is the climate emergency that we all face. How we deal with it will determine the types of chances given to our children and grandchildren and the type of world in which they get to grow up.

*"Every week, a different report or study alerts us to the real and catastrophic dangers of global warming." — [Official Report (Hansard), 21 July 2020, p13, col 2].*

That is a sentence I read out last July, during the last debate on the need for climate legislation to be brought forward. Those alarming reports have not stopped being produced since then.

Just a few short weeks ago, the United Nations produced its 'State of the Global Climate 2020: Provisional Report', stating in it that 2020 was one of the three hottest years on record, marked by wildfires, droughts, floods and melting glaciers, which prompted the UN Secretary-General to say that the world stands:

*"on the verge of the abyss".*

Hopefully, nobody in the Chamber is still in denial about the extent of the problem that we face and the need for urgent action to be taken on our part.

I listened to Clare intently as she outlined the likely impact on the world that we live in with each degree increase in temperature. Her contribution reminded me of a recent radio debate, because a similar debate is going on in the South on climate legislation. I cannot remember the name of the contributor to that debate, but he stated that sometimes the science is overly complicated and turns people off. He described the impact in lay terms, and compared the growth in the Earth's core temperature to that of rising body temperature in humans. Internal body temperature is normally, as we know, 37°C. He said that, if it rises by one or two degrees, you have a fever. With the rise of another degree, you are in hospital. If there are any further rises in temperature without reduction, you die. He went on to say that we have not seen the changes in temperature that we are currently seeing in millennia, since the last ice age. In fact, the six hottest years ever recorded were between 2015 and 2020, yet we are the only part of these islands not to have climate legislation. What message does that send?

Through the Bill, I want to be part of shaping legislation that shows our citizens that we in the Chamber are prepared, not only to join with others across the globe and show leadership but to set a direction of travel that will build a better, just and economically and environmentally vibrant economy for the citizens of the North whom we represent.

Climate impacts are not happening only in far-off places. We have all witnessed the growing number of freak weather patterns in the North. The Chair of the Agriculture Committee described the incident in the Glenelly valley. My colleague on the AERA Committee Patsy McGlone described floods in Curran and Magherafelt. Having grown up in south Derry, I know those places well. Whilst he was speaking, I googled the exact date and year of the freak snow and ice conditions that wiped out more than 10,000 animals and damaged farm properties in the Glens of Antrim. On a growing and more regular basis, all of us, as elected representatives, are dealing with issues associated with the rise in global temperatures.

I want to see the North move to enjoy fossil-free energy supplies. I want to see our businesses thrive and prosper as part of a green new deal.

I want to see our transport system transformed through government strategies that support a comprehensive public transport system and which put active travel at the top of their agenda. I want to see our farmers and rural communities rewarded for good environmental practices and the protection of the land and the environment. I want to see people who live in big towns and cities living free from the dangers of air pollution. I want to see all of that come about through a just transition that helps to lift the most vulnerable in society.

Some people listening to this will be rolling their eyes and thinking, "That is lovely rhetoric, but we have heard it all before and for years". They would be right to think that. We cannot rhetoric the climate emergency away; it requires action. For us, as legislators in the North, the Climate Change Bill is that action. The Bill will commit the Executive to creating a climate action plan containing annual targets on various emissions and environmental quality standards and measures on how those targets can be met, with the overriding ultimate goal of a net zero carbon, climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable economy by 2045. That is ambition.

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

**Mr McGuigan:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** I think that everybody in the House would agree with that, even those who do not believe in climate change. Would he agree with me that there are many options to get to net zero and that some will be more painful than others? Does he accept that forestation, the increased use of solar panels, and the re-wetting of peatlands would reduce the difficulties that some sectors will have? For instance, re-wetting 10,000 acres of peatland will have a lot less dramatic impact on agriculture than reducing herd sizes by 50%.

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I found the debate strange in that I have agreed with some of the things that he said.

There will be quick wins. As stated by the proposer of the Bill, and by many of the other Members who spoke, the Bill is not prescriptive on the way forward. The real heavy lifting will come once the Bill becomes law and we start to engage in the action plans and set the targets in each sector. I agree that there will be easy and quick wins in the first years. We should explore all of those.

Steve Aiken is not here, but I listened to him describe his earlier days as a nuclear submarine —. I do not know what you call someone who drives a nuclear submarine. Is it a pilot? Is it a lead? He said that that did not exactly set him up as an eco-warrior. I am Sinn Féin's environment and climate change spokesperson, but I do not consider myself an eco-warrior either. I was recently labelled as a trendy, lefty eco-warrior during a discussion that I had with somebody about the importance of creating more cycling and active travel infrastructure. I am not sure whether it was meant as a joke, an insult or a compliment. Maybe it was just a reaction to the growth of my ginger beard.

**5.00 pm**

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

**Mr McGuigan:** Yes.

**Mr Beggs:** Does the Member agree that there is nothing stopping us building a more extensive walking and cycling infrastructure and that it should happen now, regardless of any Bill for climate change?

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to focus on the principles of the Bill.

**Mr McGuigan:** Gabh mo leithscéal, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for his intervention. He is absolutely correct. Five kilometres of cycling-only infrastructure a year in the past five years is completely unacceptable. There is nothing to stop an increase in that.

I do not believe that the environment, dealing with climate change and protecting the earth for future generations should be the sole preserve of environmentalists or party environment spokespeople. The issue is far too important and wide reaching for that. Having said that, I commend all of the activists who, over decades, have kept the issue to the fore of the public and political agenda. In particular, I commend the young activists across the North who, in recent years, as has been said numerous times, took to the streets to highlight and campaign on the issue.

The majority of MLAs want to see climate legislation passed. That has been clearly demonstrated repeatedly. In the debate here in July, the majority of MLAs voted for the Minister to introduce climate change legislation within three months. That is the debate in which Members will remember the Minister, when

describing the climate challenge that we face, saying:

*"We should not use language such as 'emergency' or 'crisis'"— [Official Report (Hansard), 21 July 2020, p26, col 2].*

He also said that the Bill could not be produced within three months. Thankfully, others disagreed. I pay tribute to those in Climate Change NI who listened to the debate and heard the positivity and desired will of the majority of MLAs and worked to produce the Bill that is before us. They all deserve immense credit.

However, as is the case with all legislation, it is vital that we get it right. Today is only the second stage in that process. Despite the fact that climate legislation will be transformative for all of society and every sector within it, lots of today's debate has been taken up by what it could mean for our agriculture sector. I totally understand that. I represent North Antrim, which is, primarily, a rural constituency, the local economy of which relies heavily on tourism and agriculture. Like most MLAs, I have family members, friends and neighbours who are farmers. Agriculture is a vital part of my constituency, and it is vital to the economy in the North. I see nothing in the Bill that will jeopardise that, but I know that if we do not tackle growing temperatures, the negative impacts of climate change will greatly damage agriculture in my constituency and beyond, over the years to come.

Key to the Bill is a just transition. Our farmers and food producers must be supported economically, as must other sectors, as we move to reduce emissions so that they can continue to produce high-quality food. As my party colleague and Chair of the AERA Committee, Declan McAleer, has stated, the agriculture sector also has a key role to play in shaping how we move forward. That must be done in partnership with farmers and our agri-food sector. If the Bill moves beyond Second Stage today, as I hope it will, I, as a member of the AERA Committee, look forward to hearing from the public and all sections and sectors of society as we gather evidence over the next few months.

As has been pointed out, the Bill is a framework Bill. If it becomes law, the climate action plans that emanate from it, and which will, in five-year time frames, detail the actions required to reduce greenhouse gases within the time frames, will be laid before the Assembly. They will not have effect unless they are approved by the Assembly. Prior to that, they will be subject

to 16 weeks of public consultation. All of that is important.

Climate action is not, nor can it be, something that is done to society. For it to work, it must be something that is agreed and done in conjunction with society. Sinn Féin supports and wants to see a climate Bill that is ambitious, effective, fair, based on science and deliverable. How we move forward, the targets that we set and how we achieve them must be based on the best science available and in conjunction with international targets. The progression of the Bill beyond this stage will allow for that scrutiny and all of the hard work to begin.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I support the Bill at its Second Stage. I thank the sponsors of the Bill and the proposer, my constituency colleague Ms Clare Bailey, for bringing it forward. The Bill emerges from a cross-community, non-partisan initiative, and it reflects the real climate emergency ahead of us. It is not an issue on which we can do what the Assembly so often does, namely engage in endless delays or an internal process of lots of talk but no action. The Bill is already the product of well-defined expert input. If we cannot proceed based on a clear emergency and well-defined expert input, when can we proceed?

As others have mentioned, we are in the peculiar position of having two climate change Bills in development, with the other coming from the Department. This means that bringing forward this Bill has led to the Department also taking action, and that is good. We are supporting the passage of this Bill on the basis that a challenging climate change Act should exist in Northern Ireland, but we are also content to scrutinise all relevant options to achieve that. Whatever way we end up with a climate change Act, I hope that the legitimate concerns of the agri-food sector, represented by the Ulster Farmers' Union, sectoral lobbyists and others will be taken into account.

In our 'Green New Deal' paper published recently, the Alliance Party put forward proposals for enabling and supporting a transition, including support for nature-friendly farming. Those proposals will complement this Bill, but it should also be emphasised that they are essential to the success of any such legislation. That is not to say that we should not set challenging targets. On the contrary, we should, but we should also emphasise that some sectors will need support to enable us to deliver on them.

It is also important to note that our intention is not to focus on the fear factor. Indeed, I argue

that sometimes the fear factor plays too great a role in these debates and can end up turning people off. On the contrary, as my party established in its 'Green New Deal' policy paper last month, the challenge in tackling climate change can be hugely engaging and positive. It is not just about avoiding an emergency ahead but about creating opportunity. Nor is it just about the environment but about how we proceed with greater fairness in everything, from the provision of social care to the delivery of economic livelihoods. Those who engage in denial are not just denying the obvious impact of rapid climate change but denying social and economic opportunity to a much wider number of people.

Since those at the more sceptical end of this debate tend to come from the unionist Benches, I will also add that there is a significant UK success story here. The decline in carbon emissions is one thing at which the UK is genuinely and clearly world-beating. However, Northern Ireland has not contributed anything like its fair share towards that reduction in carbon emissions. Let us now ensure that Northern Ireland plays its full part in that success into the future, proofing policy to ensure that it is a leader in tackling climate change and grasping the opportunities which emerge from doing so.

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

**Ms Bradshaw:** Yes.

**Mr Beggs:** Does the Member accept that the decision that Kilroot coal-fired generation is to cease in 2024 will make a major contribution to the reduction of carbon emissions?

**Ms Bradshaw:** All opportunities to make our economy more green are to be welcomed.

I am concerned that some of the targets in the Bill are being presented as restrictive when, in fact, they are means of developing opportunities. This is more relevant to Northern Ireland than anywhere else because of our ongoing reliance on the subvention and the need to create our own wealth to reduce that reliance. What better way than to become a world leader in sustainable development and sustainable economics? The costs that some referred to could be turned into a net benefit.

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

**Ms Bradshaw:** Yes.

**Mr Poots:** With regard to sustainable economics, does the Member have evidence to challenge what the Climate Change Committee is suggesting: that we would need to wipe out over 50% of our beef and dairy herds? Does she understand that agri-food employs 100,000 people and generates £5 billion for our economy? If we do not listen to what the Climate Change Committee is saying, we will put ourselves in a position where tens of thousands of people who work in the agri-food sector will be out of jobs. Can she give some evidence to challenge the Climate Change Committee about where these economics are coming from to sustain what she has just said?

**Ms Bradshaw:** The Minister will know that I do not sit on the AERA Committee, I sit on the Health Committee. Our spokesperson sits on that Committee, and they will engage fully in the scrutiny process as people bring forward the information. I mentioned that we are open to engaging. I know that John Blair met the Ulster Farmers' Union and other organisations to look at the issues that they are bringing forward in order to see how they could be mitigated.

I will make a broader comment. There must be no question of meekly returning to the status quo when the pandemic is over. We must grasp the opportunity to reset some of our policies and even assumptions that have proven to be so outdated.

Tackling climate change is not just about the environment, as I said. It is about creating a genuine, fair society with opportunities for all. We want Northern Ireland to be a world leader in green opportunities and innovation in environmentally friendly areas as far-reaching as fintech, where we are already world-leading; renewable technologies and green aerospace, where we have much to build on; and emerging areas in hydrogen deployment and smart materials.

Yet again, we find that Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK without legislation in a crucial area. Over a decade since it was put in place elsewhere, we are lagging behind politically on yet another issue. The attitude that we will not be bounced into legislative action is one that condemns us all to lag behind. Is that what we want for Northern Ireland?

It is time to lead, it is time to legislate and it is time to grasp the opportunities of a green new deal that is supported by the Bill.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I support the Climate Change Bill in all its parts.

No one can overstate or overestimate the magnitude of the climate problems that we collectively face. Decarbonising our economy requires action right across most of our lives and will impact on every industry, including power, agriculture and travel, to name but a few.

Amid the vast number of issues impacted by climate change, I want to look at one to illustrate the importance of the task at hand. I want to discuss one of the biggest challenges of all, and that is heating our homes. According to the Department for the Economy's draft energy strategy, we need to retrofit 50,000 homes a year in Northern Ireland in order to make them energy efficient so that we can meet our net zero obligations by 2050.

Unfortunately, the strategy says very little about how to do that, and the Finance Minister's Budget says even less. Retrofitting homes to make them energy efficient is a massive challenge. Many of our homes leak heat. Many do not have cavity wall insulation and much of the existing cavity wall insulation is old and needs replacing. Windows need replacing, insulation needs to be installed, dry lining needs to go on walls and, of course, the heating systems need to be replaced, ending a reliance on the fossil fuels of oil and gas. That is an expensive set of improvements. On average, it is likely to cost in and around £20,000 per home. In some homes, it will cost up to £50,000, yet some of the homes in my constituency of Derry have a market value of £80,000 or less. Those figures should give us all a little bit of food for thought.

Then we have the vast number of privately owned rented homes. Some of them are in much worse condition. Yet there is precious little sign that Departments, their officials and, sadly, the Ministers have got to grips with the scale of the challenge. So, I congratulate the Irish Government, which are expected to announce plans very shortly under which homeowners will have access to state-backed loans in order to make properties energy efficient.

In place of a realistic solution, our Department for the Economy seems to have adopted a policy of hope and delay. The draft energy strategy includes many optimistic references to the use of green hydrogen to heat our homes. Not everyone listening to the debate will know the difference between green and blue hydrogen. I admit, hands up, that I was one of those people not so very long ago, so let me explain.

Green hydrogen is produced from renewable electricity, but the process is not energy-efficient, because much of the energy value is lost in the process of converting electricity to hydrogen. It is clean, however. On the other hand, blue hydrogen uses electricity from fossil fuels, which is neither energy-efficient nor clean, unless the carbon that is emitted is captured and stored, but the Department for the Economy says that our landscape is not suited to carbon capture and storage.

### 5.15 pm

Theoretically, hydrogen could replace natural gas in homes that are connected to the gas network. That option is currently favoured by gas companies. Remember that there have been numerous complaints, including in the University of Exeter report, that the gas industry has been too influential in making energy policy in Northern Ireland. At present, the use of hydrogen on this scale is largely theoretical, without evidence that it can work on the scale required. Nor do we have the scale of renewable electricity that is necessary to dedicate much of it to the production of green hydrogen to replace natural gas.

Britain is looking to replace its natural gas, but Northern Ireland continues to invest heavily in the gas network, with £66 million of financial support coming from the Government in recent years to expand the network in Northern Ireland. Although natural gas emits less carbon than oil — I will give it that — it remains a serious carbon emitter, and it is a fossil fuel. That is why England is seeking to make significant progress in moving away from the use of natural gas over the next four years. Despite that, the Northern Ireland Minister for the Economy seems to be giving serious consideration to new gas exploration and extraction in Fermanagh, and the Utility Regulator still has a statutory duty to promote gas as an energy source while not having a duty to promote energy efficiency. Frankly, all of that is quite unbelievable.

I will certainly support the Bill today, but the Bill and our vote mean nothing unless our Ministers act much faster than they have until now. That means that the Minister for Communities must ensure that the Housing Executive and housing associations have realistic and achievable plans for retrofitting our social housing stock. Her Department's programmes should stop financing the replacement of oil boilers with gas boilers. The same is true of the Economy Minister. To cut not only carbon emissions but fuel poverty, the focus must be on energy efficiency. The Economy Minister must, with the

backing of the whole of the Executive, come forward with proposals to retrofit homes across all tenures, as well as proposals for financing that retrofitting. Those conversions will need to use technologies that work, such as heat pumps, district heating schemes, solar panels and the electrification of heating systems backed by energy efficiency improvements.

Tackling the climate crisis is one of the most difficult tasks that faces our Administration, but none is more urgent or important.

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for giving way. She might have moved on from the Ministers, which is why I asked her to do so. I have corresponded with the Minister for Infrastructure — indeed, I have spoken to her on at least two occasions separately from that — about trying to press ahead with getting more charging points for electric cars. Of course, electric cars are much more widely available now, and 45% of our electricity is produced from renewable sources. Utilising that energy for electric cars would be a superb thing to do. Can the Member indicate whether she includes the Infrastructure Minister and whether she will press her to accelerate the availability of charging points throughout Northern Ireland, thereby encouraging investment in electric vehicles by the general public?

**Ms McLaughlin:** Thank you for your intervention, Minister. This is a cross-departmental crisis. Every single Minister has a duty to implement changes that will help to decarbonise our economy. I, too, have concerns about charging points, and I have spoken and written to the Minister for Infrastructure about that. It is a cross-departmental issue.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the Member for giving way. Maybe the Minister was not here when I mentioned it, but I proposed earlier that the just transition group should be cross-departmental and, in fact, should address issues such as transport, energy, the economy and social consequences, including infrastructure. I know that he has talked to the Minister about that issue.

**Mr Beggs:** First, I declare that I own 25 acres of agricultural land that I let out, and I also provide voluntary assistance to my parents on their farm.

From the outset, I indicate my support for Northern Ireland playing its part in enabling the United Kingdom to reach net zero carbon and achieve zero greenhouse gas emissions by

2050. I recognise that that will be painful for many sectors, and there will be challenges in getting there. The EU also aims to be climate-neutral by 2050 and appears to be moving towards legislation. Most farmers to whom I talk recognise that our climate is changing, and many recognise that action is required.

Recently, I picked up a comment from one farmer, who basically said that the tap is either fully on or fully off. That reflects what we have been experiencing, and that causes difficulty for us all.

I say that to acknowledge the fact that we have a climate emergency and to indicate my support for the Northern Ireland Assembly legislating to play our part within the United Kingdom, just as the devolved Governments in Scotland and Wales have done. They have already legislated to provide protection. Scotland has had a Climate Change Act since 2009 and recently updated its targets to include a 75% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and 90% by 2040. Scotland is well ahead of us. In 2016, Wales legislated to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and, in February this year, after almost five years of planning and actions, Wales updated its targets, worked out how to do it and is now aiming to achieve net zero by 2050.

I have to ask: why has Northern Ireland not legislated yet? I ask that to the First Minister and deputy First Minister and, indeed, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, who made commitments in NDNA that the Executive would bring forward a climate change Act to give environmental targets a strong legal underpinning. Minister, why has there been such a delay? There has been talk of legislation. When will it be presented to the Executive, and when will the official Bill be published?

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

**Mr Beggs:** Certainly.

**Mr Speaker:** Sorry, I advise the Member that we are straying into something that is not under debate today.

**Mr Beggs:** I accept the Speaker's comments.

I commend the Member for South Belfast for her private Member's Bill to the degree that it has forced this issue onto the table once more and has provided the increased visibility that the Executive have not delivered as they should have. This Bill sets out ambitious targets over a

compressed time frame that are way beyond the UK Climate Change Committee targets.

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

**Mr Beggs:** Certainly.

**Ms Bailey:** Does the Member realise that his party's manifesto commits to net zero by 2035, which is much faster and a much more compressed time frame?

**Mr Beggs:** I believe that that was a Westminster manifesto. It certainly risks delivering an overly painful shock to our economy and to jobs rather than enabling efficient changes and mitigating the effects of any change.

Clause 2 would force the Executive to bring a plan for net zero. Why does it not simply state that we will follow UK Climate Change Committee recommendations to ensure that Northern Ireland contributes its fair share of greenhouse gas reductions? It indicates a legislative commitment to reach net zero carbon by 2045. We are at least five years behind Wales in legislating, and the Bill proposes that we will miraculously leapfrog other regions in a compressed time frame. I have to ask this: how is that to be achieved without pain?

I urge all Members to read carefully and study the UK Climate Change Committee's letter to DAERA, dated 1 April 2021. It is a serious letter with an unfortunate date, but it was not an April Fool. It is a key letter, of which everyone should be aware, that was in reply to a DAERA official's request in February. In it, the Climate Change Committee states:

*"In December 2050 [sic], we recommended that any climate change legislation for Northern Ireland include a target to reduce all greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by at least 82% by 2050 as part of a fair contribution to the UK Net Zero target in 2050 and our international obligations under the Paris Agreement. This remains our clear recommendation."*

Again, I point out to everyone that there will be pain and cost as a result of legislation. We need to legislate to protect the environment but in a fair and proportionate manner so that our region contributes to the UK's meeting its climate change targets by 2050.

The UK Government are well advanced in their targets to meet the Paris agreement climate change commitments. Some regions are to be

net sinks, while others are to be net sources, but the UK as a whole will meet the climate change target set in the Paris Accord. We have to play our part.

This Bill will affect much more than just the agriculture industry. Each region of the UK is different, and all aspects must be taken into consideration. Take electricity generation. In the UK, there are numerous nuclear power stations. I understand that there is, at present, 8 GW of generating capacity in Scotland, Wales and England. There is none in Northern Ireland, however. The other regions of the UK are able to generate electricity without contributing to CO2 emissions. Somehow, we have to generate electricity without that. I acknowledge that we have the interconnector with Scotland, and, undoubtedly, some nuclear energy will flow along it. In addition, the UK has significant hydroelectric power installed, with a capacity of 4.7 GW. That includes 2.8 GW of pump storage. Again, where is there significant hydroelectricity in Northern Ireland? The reason that those two forms of electricity generation are particularly important is that they can continue to flow when there is no wind. That issue must be catered for.

Going forward, Kilroot is destined to close, so we will be entirely reliant on gas, which admittedly has lower CO2 outputs than Kilroot's coal. Nevertheless, there will be a more significant proportion of CO2 outputs in Northern Ireland. In addition, in other parts of the United Kingdom, there are an extensive number of offshore wind turbines — I think of the North Sea and Morecambe Bay — and to a degree, when wind does not blow in one area, it may blow in another. We do not have that either, which again may lead to additional energy being produced from gas.

Mention was made earlier of hydrogen production. How will the electricity be generated to generate the hydrogen? That is a significant problem that has not been addressed here. GB has greater options for assisting with generation when there is no wind.

No allowance had been made in our local targets for the fact that that may, in turn, affect the price of electricity for individuals and businesses because additional standby generations may be required and carbon mitigation may need to be purchased to compensate for any such generation.

**5.30 pm**

Others have indicated that the Bill impacts greatly on agriculture and the agri-food sector. Food production in Northern Ireland has a greater greenhouse gas footprint than in the rest of the UK. Northern Ireland agriculture is responsible for 27% of our greenhouse gas emissions; in the rest of the UK, the figure is only 10%. The UK Climate Change Committee recognised that Northern Ireland's food production for the rest of the UK generates greenhouse gas emissions here. Northern Ireland food production helps to feed the rest of the UK, and the Climate Change Committee has recognised that in assessing a fair limit and target for each area. That is a major factor in why it has not sought 100% greenhouse gas reduction by 2050, never mind by 2045. The Climate Change Committee stated:

*"Our analysis shows that Northern Ireland's position as a strong agri-food exporter to the rest of the UK, combined with more limited capabilities to use 'engineered' greenhouse gas removal technologies, means that it is likely to remain a small net source of greenhouse gas emissions – almost entirely from agriculture – in any scenario where the UK reaches Net Zero in 2050. It is fair that those residual emissions should be offset by actions in the rest of the UK.*

*At this time, our assessment is that a Net Zero target covering all GHGs cannot credibly be set for Northern Ireland. Targets should be ambitious, but must be evidence-based and deliverable with a fair and equitable route map to achieving them."*

How does the Bill recognise that comment by the UK's Climate Change Committee? How does it take on board that committee's views? I have not heard or seen that.

The committee also highlights that there is a difference in land use and, in particular, that:

*"The livestock sector results in a higher proportion of grassland in Northern Ireland and lower proportion of cropland. Forest coverage is also lower than the rest of the UK at around 8% (including small woodland area), and significant emissions from peatlands mean that land use is currently a much larger net source of emissions in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the UK."*

Northern Ireland is starting at a different level and on a different plane and:

*"must plant trees and restore peatland to build a net land use sink over time".*

**Mr Wells:** I am glad that the Member has given way because the Minister is in the Chamber. Would he accept my point that any tree planting that has a high proportion of Sitka — a foreign exotic species — does nothing for biodiversity or climate change and, therefore, that the vast proportion of planting must be of deciduous trees native to Northern Ireland?

**Mr Beggs:** The Member has introduced an interesting point. I hope that the Minister will respond to it.

The final comment from the UK Climate Change Committee in this section is that the starting point of our land use:

*"means that the total size of the net sink will be smaller in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the UK by 2050."*

I think, in particular, of the Minister's recent announcement of 50 hectares of new forest in north Antrim. There was huge cost involved in establishing that. There is cost involved in moving forward. Farmers generally do not have the money up front to convert from agricultural land to forestry. It is hugely expensive, and there is a long wait for that crop to be harvested. Most farmers could not wait for that. There is a cost involved in the change, and we are starting at a different point.

The UK Climate Change Committee has assessed our infrastructure in setting local targets. It highlights the fact that the natural gas network in Northern Ireland is less developed. It talks about our electricity network, existing housing stock, clusters of heavy industry and airport infrastructure. It goes on to comment on our potential to store CO<sub>2</sub>. As I indicated, part of the plan for parts of the rest of the UK is to use carbon capture to get to the zero figure. The Climate Change Committee says:

*"Northern Ireland is less likely to have a major UK CCS cluster by 2050, and therefore does not appear to be the most ideal place to locate greenhouse gas removal technologies."*

In that can be seen the complexity of the range of issues that we face. It is not a matter of picking a figure that we have to reach; it is complicated.

Carbon capture is planned to play a role in enabling the UK to reach its Paris climate

agreement obligations to protect the planet, but our regional figure will not benefit from capture elsewhere. A different allowance was set for Northern Ireland. That has been a contributory factor in the recommendation of the 82% by 2050 target.

The 2045 zero greenhouse gas target is causing huge concern in the rural community. Friends and neighbours have contacted me because they are concerned not only for their current enterprises but for future generations. What money will there be to mitigate all this? Our budgets are already stretched. I suspect that promises of mitigation will be difficult to deliver.

Why do we not legislate for the targets agreed by the UK Climate Change Committee to enable the UK to meet, at least, the Paris Accord 2050 obligations of net zero greenhouse gas emissions? If individual plans demonstrate that we can better them, we can increase our targets as Scotland and Wales have done. Why have we not learned from them? Is that not a route that we should go down?

One of the most concerning statements in the letter is this:

*"The context of a Net Zero 2050 target for the whole of the UK is also important. Rather than leading to additional overall reduction in UK GHG emissions," —*

wait for it —

*"there is a risk that a Net Zero target for Northern Ireland in the same year or earlier could simply shift a greater share of the UK-wide costs of reaching Net Zero to Northern Ireland."*

The UK is committed to reaching net zero by 2050. If we decide to move ahead of that, as we are at liberty to do, and pick up the cost and the pain, what may happen? The UK may simply reduce the amount of carbon capture that they are planning for other parts of the United Kingdom. We can inflict as much pain as we wish on our agriculture sector and our other industry, affecting jobs, employment and our economy.

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for giving way. One of the issues of most concern to me — it should be shared by the Assembly — is that, if we go down this route and decide that we do not need beef production and dairy production, we will have to get those products elsewhere. I believe that the Member indicated in Committee

that we could get them from western Europe and New Zealand, but maybe the Member has not checked her facts and acknowledged that western European production of beef and dairy products has a higher carbon footprint per kilogram than we have in the United Kingdom. Instead of reducing carbon emissions, the Bill, perversely, is potentially raising them by simply diverting the problem, exporting the problem elsewhere and saying, "Haven't we done well, guv?".

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

**Mr Beggs:** I wish to answer the Minister first. I may subsequently give way to the Member. For clarity, the Minister was not referring to me: I am not on the Agriculture Committee. I believe that he was referring to the proposer of the Bill. I will happily give way.

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Member.

Minister, at that session of the Committee, when I was asked that question, I was questioning where we could pick up the slack in relation to dairy production and using the New Zealand model. I was not talking about importing from New Zealand; I was saying that it has its own climate Bill and its own measures, and, therefore, to increase its production it would be measured against its existing climate legislation, which is something that we do not have.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Member for her contribution.

There is another interesting quote in the letter from the Climate Change Committee. The letter must be studied by everyone. It is critical to the future agri-food industry in Northern Ireland and the wider economy. It cannot be taken lightly. I stumbled upon it. How many of you have read it? I ask that everyone ensures that they read it, or what they are wishing to achieve may not be achieved. The letter also says:

*"A larger reduction in output from Northern Ireland's livestock sector compared to the rest of the UK. Even our most stretching Tailwinds scenario — which entails a 50% fall in meat and dairy production in Northern Ireland by 2050 and significantly greater levels of tree planting on the land released"*  
—

wait for it —

*"is not enough to get Northern Ireland to Net Zero emissions in 2050."*

That is what the UK experts in this field have stated. I am aghast that I have not heard this referred to in the debate so far. It is critical stuff. Another comment is made that reflects what was said earlier by the Minister. There is a risk that:

*"Without a corresponding reduction in consumption of such produce, this would simply shift emissions overseas."*

We can stop producing food here; we can stop encouraging farmers and our agri-food industry; we can lower our carbon footprint; and, at that point, consumers in the UK will take food from elsewhere —.

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

**Mr Beggs:** I will.

**Mr Wells:** I am somewhat confused. My understanding was that the Member's party had signed up to be enthusiastic supporters of the Climate Change Bill. Yet, unless I read him wrong — this is a little bit of the kettle calling the pot black — I suspect he is taking almost a solo run here and seems to be picking the Bill apart line by line. He is perfectly entitled to do that, if that is his view, but is he in line with his party's view on the issue?

**Mr Beggs:** I ask the Member to be patient.

There is a real risk of offshoring food production. Will that include other industries? I referred to electricity: if electricity costs go exceedingly high, there is a risk there.

Further, if we move in advance of HMG — this is another important aspect, and I have thought about it — there may not be appropriate carbon tax in place to protect Northern Ireland producers and businesses from competitors overseas. That is a real thing. We can add costs to our local producers and businesses, but will there be protection? I suspect that, at some point, there may be carbon taxes coming in to give a degree of protection and stop unfair competition from the rest of the world, but, if we move ahead of the rest of the United Kingdom, we may not have such protection.

There is a risk that food being sourced from elsewhere in the world could add pain to the local agriculture sector. Will that result in food that has a greater carbon footprint, is perhaps of an even lower quality and has even been produced with lower animal welfare standards compared with our local products? That is the complexity of what we are doing. All those

factors must be considered. It is not enough to pick a date and say that we will sort it out by then. This is extremely complex. Some people think that I think too much about things, but I try to get an understanding of where we are and come to a reasonable conclusion.

**5.45 pm**

The Climate Change Committee indicates that going too slowly could lead to unnecessary costs in the future — I agree — and to Northern Ireland missing out on the benefits of the climate investment that takes place elsewhere in the UK. However, going too fast and, in particular, aiming to decarbonise significantly faster than the rest of the UK also poses several risks. Setting emissions reduction targets that are too ambitious to be delivered can undermine their credibility. Going beyond the natural rate of stock turnover and making equipment redundant earlier in its lifetime might lead to the premature scrapping of assets such as vehicles and boilers. That may be costly, it risks undermining popular support for transition and would cause increased embedded emissions. If we scrap equipment early and before the end of its normal lifespan, guess what? We are adding to emissions and costs.

For all those reasons, I cannot support the Bill. In summary, I want a climate change Act for Northern Ireland that is proportionate and fair. Having listened to the contributions so far, I remain concerned that the proposals that are being made are in danger of placing unrealistic requirements on people. I call for common sense. As part of the UK, we must do our bit to protect the planet. I support the 82% reduction in emissions by 2050. I have no doubt that that will be very challenging and painful. It is not a pain-free option, but I recognise that, in playing our part to effect climate change, we must do it. That is why I support playing our part in the United Kingdom.

The UK has targets for carbon capture, and we cannot be part of that. Lots of complex issues are involved here. I urge Members not to be attracted by a simple figure or headline. We need to understand all the knock-on effects. As I said, for that reason, having assessed all the information and looked carefully at the Bill and the Climate Change Committee's detailed letter of, I think, 18 pages, I cannot support the Bill.

**Mr Allister:** The easiest thing in politics is to follow the crowd. I do not intend to follow the crowd on the Bill, and I am glad that Mr Beggs does not either, nor, might I add, do I intend to follow the crowd of unionist leaders who are

abandoning the leadership of their parties. *[Laughter.]* However, when you come to this subject, you find that the communal pressure that builds towards supporting a Bill such as this draws so heavily on hysteria and whipping up fears that there comes a point when it loses its traction with credibility. Some of the cheerleaders for the proposition that there will be the Apocalypse if we do not pass the Bill would take us down that road. Of course, I remind the House that some of the past cheerleaders of the same lobby told us that, by today, we would all be dead and gone because of the horrible things that would happen.

Al Gore. Remember him? Back in 2006, he told us that the world had 10 years to avert a true planetary emergency. In 2009, he reckoned that there was a 75% chance that the North Pole would be ice-free in five to seven years. In 1989, a UN official said:

*"entire nations could be wiped off the face of the Earth by rising sea levels if the global warming trend is not reversed by the year 2000."*

In an earlier intervention, I quoted the executive director of the UN environmental programme, who, 39 years ago, said that there would be by the turn of the century:

*"an environmental catastrophe which will witness devastation as complete, as irreversible, as any nuclear holocaust."*

The same genre of people today tell us that the Apocalypse is upon us.

I acknowledge that there is climate change. There always has been climate change. Over the millennia, our climate has changed time and time again. It is changing now, but, frankly, I will take a lot of convincing that it is all because of belching cows or industry or anything of that nature. Yet, on the back of that, we are told that we must do this and that, if we do not, we are doomed.

What is it that we are being asked to do? Very often, when a Bill is published, the first thing that I reach for is the explanatory and financial memorandum (EFM), to see what it is all about. Yes, I will read the Bill, but I want to see what its proponents are saying. This explanatory and financial memorandum is the most audacious but vacuous document that I have read in a long time. It is audacious in the sense that it tells us that Climate Coalition Northern Ireland represents over 390,000 people. This afternoon, the Chair of the Agriculture Committee had the number at over 400,000.

Interestingly, if you go to the website of the Climate Coalition and look up its membership, you will find that 26 individuals belong to it, along with all sorts of corporate bodies and institutions. How the coalition gets to 390,000 — that creative and fictional figure — is just not explained. If you go to its website — I will do it live — and click on the button to support its petition in favour of the Bill, you will discover that 1,559 people have signed the petition that the mass-followed coalition has produced — 1,559. This morning, it was 1,558. We need to be more careful with some of the propaganda that is being ushered out on the matter.

When reading the section of the explanatory and financial memorandum that deals with the Bill's background, I asked myself, "What will it say about the Climate Change Committee's report?". The explanatory and financial memorandum was published on 22 March. By then, the first letter from the Climate Change Committee to the Minister, which was written in December, had been on the CCC's website for three months. The background does not even mention it. There is not a single reference in this EFM to the Climate Change Committee and the letter that it wrote. Mr Beggs has dealt very fully with it. That means that I need not deal as fully with it, but it is a very illuminating document. It tells us that:

*"Achieving net-zero GHG emissions for the whole of the UK by 2050 does not necessitate that every sector or area of the UK reaches absolute zero emissions by that date. Some parts of the UK will be 'net sources' of greenhouse gases by 2050 with emissions offset in other parts of the UK that are 'net sinks'."*

It records how much we are relied on in the UK as a food producer and that we are a net exporter with nearly 50% of all agri-food products going from Northern Ireland to GB, and, therefore, it is right that we should have the benefit of the sinks that are elsewhere.

The letter goes on to be very clear, as Mr Beggs expounded, that a consequence of forcing net zero on Northern Ireland is:

*"A substantial reduction in output from Northern Ireland's livestock farming"*.

That is why it says that, by 2050, for Northern Ireland, to get the whole UK to where it needs to be, 82% is sufficient, but it is not sufficient for those who drive the Bill. They want us to go ahead of everyone else and, by 2045, have a 100% reduction, and all that with no regard to what it would do to our primary industry in

Northern Ireland. The proposer of the motion managed to make a speech, and, unless I missed it, did not once mention agriculture, yet agriculture is the very foundation of our economy.

Someone said in the debate that the Bill does not set targets for agriculture. I am sorry, but agri-food is identified in clause 3(6)(i) and clause 3(7)(h) on sectoral plans. Sectoral plans inevitably will include targets, so the Bill anticipates setting sectoral plans with targets for our agri-food industry.

We have all had many lobby letters on this subject — rightly so — but probably the one that encapsulated for me the threat came from the Northern Ireland Grain Trade Association. Let me read a couple of paragraphs from it because I have not heard them countered in this debate:

*"The private Member's Bill proposed by the Green Party will be devastating to the agri-food sector. It will reduce the value of the livestock sector by more than 50% — taking around £1 billion per annum out of the rural economy, leading to rural depopulation and a major loss of export earnings. There will be a loss of up to 50,000 jobs in the processing and supply industries which will devastate the NI economy ...*

*The private Member's Bill currently proposed is ill-considered and irresponsible. It ignores the UK Climate Change Committee's advice which recognises the much greater importance of agriculture in Northern Ireland and that much of the food produced here is consumed in Great Britain. It also flies in the face of the excellent work carried out by our expert scientists and researchers in DAERA and AFBI and the reality is that the measures will contribute nothing to the global environment or to the challenge of feeding a growing population. The inevitable outcome of this policy is that the UK requirement for meat and dairy will simply be imported from regions where emissions are higher, and animal health and welfare standards are much lower than in Northern Ireland."*

That sounds pretty irrefutable. I have heard no one in the debate refute it: no one.

## 6.00 pm

People have spoken out of both sides of their mouth in the debate. They have said, "Oh, we're going to look after the farming sector.

We're going to consult. We're going to make sure that these things don't happen". It is clear what will happen if the Bill is enacted. You cannot proclaim, for the sake of your constituency, that you will protect your farming community if you troop through a Lobby tonight to vote for something that will devastate your farming community. That is the reality that we face in the debate.

I remind the House of a point that I made in an intervention: the targets set cannot be reduced. We are told, "Oh, things can be reviewed" and, "We can look at things as we go along". There are some things that you cannot look at. Clause 11(2) is clear:

*"the Executive Office must not propose any alteration which has the effect, whether directly or indirectly, of lowering any target under section 3(2) ... from the level approved by the Assembly under section 2(3) ... when the corresponding climate action plan was so approved."*

There is no second chance under the Bill to rescue a sector that you will so wantonly devastate. You cannot reduce the targets.

Another point that I want to talk about is the powers that the Bill creates. Clauses 5 and 6 and the relevant appendix create a Northern Ireland climate office and a Northern Ireland climate commissioner, and staff will be appointed by the commissioner. There is no limit on the number of staff whom the commissioner can appoint; indeed, there is no refusal of the House to approve the expenditure, because it is to be done under the Assembly Commission and the Assembly Commission's budget is not alterable by the House. It is not something with which the House can tinker. Once it gets through the Audit Committee, it follows inevitably. By putting it under the Assembly Commission, the House is signing a blank cheque for the cost of the Northern Ireland climate office and the commissioner. The Bill tells us that salaries can be paid as high as the highest salary in the Civil Service. What is that? About £170,000 or £180,000? We truly are signing a blank cheque with the Bill. Once we give the function to the commissioner to appoint his or her staff, the Assembly Commission must do it. It becomes part of the Assembly Commission's budget and is beyond our reach. A blank cheque is what the House is being asked to sign in respect of the Bill.

Of course, under clause 6, the commissioner can acquire property. I invited the sponsor to

tell us what it meant, but she did not oblige. I will read clause 6(8) again:

*"The Climate Commissioner may do anything (including acquire or dispose of property or rights) which is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive or incidental to, the discharge of the functions of the Climate Commissioner."*

I asked, "What does it mean that the climate commissioner can do anything, including disposing of rights?"

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

**Mr Allister:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** The Member is, perhaps, one of the most experienced parliamentarians in the Building. He knows what will happen, because it is what happened to his two private Member's Bills. The Bill will go to the Committee, which will be diligent in teasing out all his concerns. No doubt, when it comes back from the Committee, there will be significant changes to what we have before us at the moment. I also suspect that he, using his expertise, will table amendments at Consideration Stage if he is not happy. He has concerns, and those will be dealt with at that stage. The Bill will come back, and he will have ample opportunity to scrutinise and amend it accordingly. He certainly has the ability to do that.

**Mr Allister:** Well, of course, the much better option is not to let it get to Committee. It is so flawed and its potential so disastrous that it would be far better for the House to take courage and refuse it.

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

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

**Mr Wells:** The honourable Member for North Antrim needs to come clean. Does he believe that man has any role in the climate change disaster that we face? If he does not believe that and believes that it is just a natural occurrence, he is right: there should be no Bill, because there is no crisis. Is that where he stands?

**Mr Allister:** I have made it plain: I accept that we should all want to leave the planet in better shape than we found it, but I will not be swept along by the hysteria that climate change has never happened before and is happening now only because we have too many animals or too

many factories or too many cars. Climate change happened long before we had cars or anything else. Climate change happens, and the profligate use of resources, I have no doubt, can add somewhat to it. However, it is not the primary cause. Natural cycles of climate change happen. That does not take away from us our obligation to do what is right but not to do what is foolish.

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

**Mr Allister:** Yes.

**Mr Beggs:** I am not sure exactly what the Member is saying, but does he not accept that, since the time of the Industrial Revolution, there has been considerably more CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere and that there is science involved in how that can adversely affect the climate?

**Mr Allister:** I do not think that I have denied that. However, I am saying that the answer is not to take 50% of our animals and slaughter them or to take 50% of our production and export it to the depleting rainforests of Brazil and then sit back smugly and say, "Didn't we do well?". That is the ethos of the Bill. People, much as Mr Wells might not like it, will continue to buy meat. Do they buy the meat produced in north Antrim or the meat produced on land that has been stripped in the Amazon basin? That is an issue that politicians in the Western world have to consider. Therefore, I say to the House that the Bill is, as the Northern Ireland Grain Trade Association, I think, described it, ill considered.

I am seeking to illustrate that, in some of its powers, it is extreme. It is full of staff. There is no limit on staff and no ability to control the expenditure. What of the Northern Ireland block grant? Where do you think that money is coming from? It is coming out of the block grant. Of course, the Bill also includes the right to pay incentives. On the powers of the commissioner, clause 10 gives sweeping powers to the commissioner to compel the delivery of information. That is a largely unaccountable person being endowed with those huge capacities.

I come back to this point about clause 6(8) that I was distracted from: what are the rights that a commissioner thinks they can dispose of? Here we are in the House, saying that we will all sit back and be perfectly content that a commissioner whom we cannot remove from office unless there is a two-thirds majority and who can be appointed in perpetuity every five years, which conflicts poorly with international

standards, will be given powers to "dispose of property or rights" in a sector that is dominated by the private sector. Are we serious? Maybe, before the debate ends, somebody will tell me what clause 6(8) means and, if I am wrong, put me right.

On the question of cost, what a farce. When you go to the explanatory and financial memorandum to get an insight into what the policy in the Bill will cost, you are told this:

*"It has not been possible to precisely cost either of the above implications",*

those being the costs and the actions taken under the action plans. You are being asked again to sign a blank cheque. The cost of the office has no cap, and the commissioner can be as highly paid as anyone in the Civil Service. They can acquire property: clause 6(7). They can issue financial incentives: clause 3(7). I remind the House that, no matter how punitive and unworkable all this ultimately turns out to be, you cannot, because of clause 11(2), reduce the targets.

I say to the House, although it will not heed me — most Members, I dare to say, not having read the Bill and not having read the Climate Change Committee's letter, will still troop through the Lobby to set on its way legislation that will devastate much of our basic industry and write a blank cheque — that that is not the right way go.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Gerry Carroll. I remind Members that the Minister will be called by 7.00 pm at the latest. I ask Members to be mindful of their contributions because others want to contribute.

**6.15 pm**

**Mr Carroll:** The Polish socialist Rosa Luxemburg said over 100 years ago that we are faced with a choice of overhauling the system in favour of socialism or facing the descent into barbarism. Those words have been repeated countless times since, but I think that it would be hard to imagine a scenario about which that phrase could more aptly be applied than to the climate crisis facing our planet today. The crisis that we face ultimately has its roots in capitalism: in pillaging, burning and aggressively extracting from our earth at a ceaseless rate to feed an ever-growing profit drive, regardless of the consequences for the environment. Those who bear the most responsibility sit at the top of society, raking in said profits while shaping a narrative that all

individuals share the responsibility for a crisis of their making. The failure of Governments or, more realistically, the complicity of Governments around the world has fuelled rising temperatures, uncontrollable gas emissions and the resulting weather catastrophes that harm the most vulnerable.

That is the context under which this Bill was written, and, in that context, I think that it is important. Unlike Mr Beggs, I do not think that it goes far enough, to be frank. I agreed to co-sign and support the Bill because it is a start, locally, to challenging climate change, and I remain utterly unconvinced that Ministers in the Executive would take even these introductory measures if left to their own devices. We must see the rise in emissions, the use of fossil fuels and plastic, and environmentally damaging practices as being directly connected to the rise of capitalism, particularly the neoliberal version of the past 40 to 50 years. Environmental breakdown and inequality are essential to both. I know that that may sound like sacrilege to some in this House, but, unless we point this out, many of the aims of the Bill and our ability to effectively challenge the climate crisis in society at large will likely be unachievable.

I welcome the role of a climate commissioner in this Bill. An independent scrutineer of our environmental efforts will be vital to hold us to the aim of targeting the big polluters and reducing emissions. People today can be jailed for non-payment of TV licence fees but major corporate polluters — people who are serial emitters and destroyers of our natural environment who ignore and breach environmental regulations — are likely to be given licences, grants and, in many cases, even protection from the police when challenged. This must change, and the climate commissioner must be allowed to work without political or business interference.

I also welcome the focus in this Bill on a just transition. We know beyond doubt that the climate crisis hurts those at the bottom of society the most, and, through intervention, the most vulnerable must be assisted as we move towards a more eco-orientated society. I think that, in order to stick to the principles of a just transition, there are a number of priorities that we must adopt, whether through the process of this Bill or future Bills, and these are issues that movements around the world are calling for.

The first is the democratisation of planning and the economy. That would allow us to put the needs of communities and the environment first when making key decisions about resources. It should not be limited to housebuilding, although

that is clearly important. We need to talk about democratising the planning and the funding of food and transport as well. Take food: we have supermarkets planning how to fill their stores, what food production lines they use and what quality to bulk buy, all on the basis of maximising profit. The system is intrinsically linked to the production of food on the basis of profit rather than need, and this generates waste, destroys the natural earth and often produces huge amounts of emissions, particularly methane. To tackle this, we need to see farmers enabled to produce more sustainably and financially supported to do so. Small farmers in particular do not benefit from the current system, as many have maybe ducked the question. As Mike Davis has noted, the problem occurs:

*"because the world market misallocates crop production (beef over grain) and fails to deliver basic income to small producers and farmworkers."*

Through a just transition to sustainable production, we can see that change.

Unfortunately, big producers and even some Members in this House would rather see us separate out the issue of agriculture and methane production. That is thoroughly unambitious and undermining. We need to look at the figures: 25% of human greenhouse emissions come from agriculture, food production and deforestation, and this kind of agriculture capitalism is, ultimately, failing workers as well as the planet. The UN has stated that feeding a world population of 9.1 billion people will require the raising of food production by around 70% from 2005 levels. Clearly, this will lead to a massive spike in emissions and has to be addressed. In doing so, we have to separate the interests of the small and medium farmers from those big food production plants which, ultimately, have an interest in keeping things as they are.

I find it galling that some expressed faux concern about farmers while supporting or saying nothing about the Minister's plan to scrap the Agricultural Wages Board, which provides some protection for those workers. Workers on the food production line have been failed time and time again. Notably, they have suffered higher rates of COVID infection. They are paid extremely low wages and reports of conditions, particularly for migrant workers, say that they leave a lot to be desired. Importantly, we need a just transition for them as well.

Ultimately, we need a new system that includes farmers, food producers and workers and is one

that puts the needs of communities at its centre. That would capture the spirit and idea of a just transition, which is in the Bill. A just transition must also extend to the creation of a greener economy that creates jobs by building public homes that are fit for purpose, extending carbon sinks and re-wetting bogs. Homes, jobs and a healthier environment: tick, tick, tick. However, it is that kind of break that threatens private developers, big extractors and those who do well in society as it is. That is where we get the resistance and lobbying.

Any Government worth their salt would have made a start already on what is in the Bill. They would have written an environmental charter for companies that forces them to adhere to zero carbon and emission reductions. They would have broken with their addiction to roads and cars already, forced pension funds to disinvest from destructive fossil fuel companies or else risk operating illegally and tackled many more issues.

It is worth pointing out that the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the idea that the state does not or cannot intervene in areas of health or provide support to communities and workers. Leaving aside how many people fell through the cracks or how slowly some actions were implemented, the state intervened and implemented measures, and that puts it up to those who argue for and support a Thatcherite, small-state vision of society and the further privatisation of public services etc. If a state can intervene in the middle of a global pandemic to provide some level of protection and support, what justification can there be for a lack of intervention to prevent further descent towards climate catastrophe, which will threaten the lives and health of our communities, those of millions of people across the world and, ultimately, our ability to survive into the future? How many livelihoods could be improved or even saved with such an approach?

Ultimately, I do not think that this or any Bill will force the hand for action, but these are important, though limited, steps in the right direction. We know what it will take: an almighty shift on the streets to break politicians, with their reckless record in Stormont.

I support the Bill, and I extend my solidarity to the school students; XR activists; all those people in the Climate Coalition; everyone who has stood up to protect the environment recently and over the last number of years; all those campaigning against Dalradian Gold in Tyrone; those campaigning for action around the Mobuoy dump; residents in my constituency campaigning to address the issues emanating

from the Mullaghglass site; and the many more campaigns both on this island and across the world.

**Mr McGrath:** In supporting the Second Reading of the Climate Change Bill, I pay tribute to those Members from most of the parties who brought it to the House and to all the organisations and groups that helped to shape the Bill that we have before us.

We must make no mistake about this: regardless of flag, language or even the Northern Ireland protocol, that which we discuss today will be the defining debate of our generation. None of us can shy away from the discussion, because all of us will be affected by the outcome of our deliberations and the impact that the Bill has on the world around us.

Climate change is real, it is happening and has been happening for some time. The stark reality is that, unless we act now, we will doom future generations to a world that has been irreversibly infected by the deadly effects of climate change.

Action must be taken now, and it must stem from the House. Leadership must lead and should not be afraid to do so. Such leadership must be proactive and consistent. Doing the bare minimum is not enough.

That was evidenced last year when, upon taking up the ministerial portfolio for Infrastructure, Nichola Mallon MLA invested in an eco-friendly ministerial car and zero-carbon public transport, delivered new cycle lanes, invested in climate-friendly street lighting and created a £20 million blue-green infrastructure fund. She has clearly set the benchmark for other Ministers to follow.

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

**Mr McGrath:** I normally would, but we are really pushed for time, and you have had enough time.

The Bill that is before us has clear objectives. The overarching objective is to achieve net zero emissions in Northern Ireland by 2045 at the latest. It places a duty on the Executive Office to bring forward a climate action plan within three years; and it proposes the establishment of a Northern Ireland climate office and commissioner to set the targets — in doing so, they will be free from political interference — and to monitor their effectiveness. I am under no illusion that those will be ambitious targets to meet, but, frankly, I do not see ambitious

targets as a justifiable reason for some to object to the Bill. If we are bold enough to set the aspirations for our response to climate change at the highest level, and we follow through on those, we will cease to lag behind the rest of these islands. Potentially, we will become the benchmark for other regions to follow.

I appreciate that many have concerns about the Bill. Certainly, enough of my constituents have contacted me to that effect. South Down is, after all, a predominantly rural constituency with many agricultural heartlands. Farming and fisheries are part of the lifeblood of South Down and make an essential contribution to the economic success of the North. As in other coastal constituencies, coastal erosion is a major issue in South Down, and we have seen the significant destruction of our natural coastline and its hinterland.

More recently, we saw the immediate impact of climate change, with further wildfires across the Mourne. Once, these wildfires were happening every four or five years; now they take place every year, sometimes numerous times. Tragically, it has been pointed out to me that because our dry seasons are becoming drier and longer, we could soon witness wildfires in Ireland on the scale of those witnessed recently in Australia. Something needs to change, and I am glad that we will have the opportunity to have a further discussion tomorrow.

I heard the concerns of local farmers and those in our agri-food industry. They stated that they are ready and willing to do their bit in the fightback against climate change, but they want their voices to be heard and their valid concerns to be listened to. It is of the utmost —

**Ms S Bradley:** I appreciate the Member giving way, as I have not had an opportunity to speak on this very important Bill. There appears to be a perception that we are voting on the final Bill. Will the Member join me in putting on record that this is the Second Stage of a Bill to put in place a framework that will feed into action plans?

I encourage the farmers who have been in contact with my office and the Member's office to engage in that process. The farmers in South Down, like farmers everywhere, are in the most privileged position to effect change and to ensure that farming is sustainable in the long term.

**Mr McGrath:** I thank the Member for her contribution. It is great to hear a range of voices from South Down, rather than the same one. If we reflect on some of the other contributions

that we heard, in which the Bill was taken clause by clause, we would almost feel that we were voting on the final Bill. Of course, as the Member points out, it is only the principles of the Bill that we will vote on, and there will be many opportunities to engage and help to shape the Bill as it moves forward.

As the Bill progresses, it is of the utmost importance that those people are listened to and that government works with them and does not leave them behind. Although there are valid concerns about potential job losses as a result of the Bill, we must remember that it presents opportunities for growth in the green and sustainability sectors. We will need to see the development of a just transition. That element will be critical.

Perhaps the loudest voice in the ongoing debate has been that of young people. Of everything that we discuss in this place, climate change is the issue that will determine the story of their future. The start of that story has already been written. However, we still have an opportunity to write our contribution and smooth the way forward for future generations. The alternative is to kick the can down the road and leave the fight to the next generation.

Years from now, when most of us lie in scorched-earth graves, our next generation will be left to step out into polluted air in which every breath is contaminated, and every step in the sunlight is a step closer to skin cancer. They will rightly ask why the Assembly did not act when it had the chance. Should that awful day come, we will not be excused for that, and rightly so. The next generation will not forgive or forget. The time is always right to do what is right, and that time is now.

Doing the basics will not cut it any more. It is time to right the wrongs of the past and bring forward an ambitious and bold legislative framework to deliver a zero-carbon society and economy. Every party that seeks to be part of our government must commit to that. The SDLP will not be found wanting. I thank the Member for bringing the Bill before us. I wish her well with its progress, and I am more than content to support it.

### 6.30 pm

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for his cooperation. I call Andrew Muir. I remind Members that your remarks and the length of your contribution will determine how many more Members will be given an opportunity to speak. The Minister will be called at 7.00 pm sharp.

**Mr Muir:** I am conscious of that, Mr Speaker, so I will try to keep my comments brief. As the Alliance Party infrastructure spokesperson, I want to focus on how the Bill will impact on infrastructure, particularly transport. That said, the Bill is long overdue, and the need for legislation is clear.

There is much to commend about the Bill as it stands. There is a need for Northern Ireland-specific emission reduction targets, regular reporting on emission reductions and independent monitoring. As has been outlined recently and throughout the debate, this is the start of the passage of the Bill. We are at Second Stage. There will be Committee Stage, Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage, as Mr Allister is aware. This is part of an engaging and iterative process.

I particularly welcome the focus on short-term targets. It is all too easy for politicians to promise emission reduction targets for more than 20 years down the line, safe in the knowledge that they will not, perhaps, be about to see them through. To make the long-term targets real, they need to be combined with short-term targets and measures for which the Bill provides. Often, when we debate matters in the Assembly, it is on a basis of us versus them or right versus wrong. As the Bill passes through the legislative process, I look forward to an evidence-based discussion on the measures included in the Bill, in the knowledge that everyone is agreed on the need to cut emissions and on the fact that that matters.

I welcome the provision for sectoral plans, whereby sectors will focus on how they can reduce their own emissions. Targets are meaningless if they do not have tangible and immediate actions to back them up. Transport accounts for between 16% and 23% of Northern Ireland's emissions. Our average transport emissions per head are higher than those in the rest of the UK, but, perhaps most disturbingly, over the past 20 years, when cars have become cleaner, our transport emissions have grown by 29%. On transport, it is abundantly clear that we are heading in the wrong direction and need to turn around fast.

The Bill legislates for the declaration of a climate emergency, something for which the Assembly voted early last year, and, in reality, something that we have been aware of for much longer. It is one thing to declare an emergency, but it is another to respond as if you are in an emergency. In the past decade, we have improved our public transport network immeasurably and delivered better-quality services and customer experiences, but there is

still not enough progress in generating a modal shift from cars to active travel and public transport. As Philip McGuigan outlined, Jonathan Hobbs from NI Greenways recently reported that 25 kilometres of cycling infrastructure has been built over the past five years in the whole of Northern Ireland. Last year, the Minister for Infrastructure, with the best of intentions, no doubt, pledged to seize the opportunity for a green recovery from COVID-19, yet, more than a year later, we find ourselves deeply frustrated at the pace of change. Active travel made up 2.5% of the Department for Infrastructure's capital budget for last year. For every one person who works in DFI's transport policy division, which includes active travel, more than 40 work in DFI Roads. We want to support the Minister in the bold action that is required in the Department, and the Bill is one key way through which we can kick-start the radical action that is needed to reach net zero emissions for infrastructure. The actions required include the rapid roll-out of electric vehicle charging infrastructure, as the current set-up is a shambles, and the Department for Infrastructure's budget needs to be rebalanced to fund active travel properly and to review concessionary fares in order to get more young people using our rapidly decarbonised public transport network.

Last month, the Alliance Party published its green new deal. It sets out many other measures that we need to take to meet the requirements in the Bill. Although having a walking and cycling champion is welcome, the reality is that it is a role that has simply been added as a duty for another civil servant. If we are to get real about making the modal shift, we need to have an independent, sustainable and active travel champion.

We all know what needs to be done to avert climate catastrophe, and we know that it can be done while growing our economy and creating a fairer and more equitable society. We support the Bill at Second Stage, because it is a key part of the process of making that vision a reality.

**Miss Woods:** It has been said that we are the first generation to feel the impact of climate change and the last generation that can do something about it. Today, the Bill's Second Stage is a historic moment for Northern Ireland. I am not going to go into much detail on the Bill's clauses. The co-sponsors have done that already. It is a historic moment that we need to consider in order to demonstrate our commitment to protecting our children's future and the generations to come.

Year after year, glaciers retreat and polar ice caps melt at a faster rate. Global temperatures keep rising. The science is there, and we all know the importance of listening to the science, especially in the past year. Why have we not been listening to the science that has been staring us in the face for so long? We see more and more extreme weather events and wildfires that destroy everything in their path, and we need to rebalance. A changing climate is not something that is far off in the future, something that is not affecting us or something that we are able to avoid. It is happening right now. It is already affecting energy prices, crop yields, and food and water supplies across the globe. That results in higher prices and food shortages in poorer counties, which leads to political instability, conflict and the mass movement of people. Changing climates are already changing our food systems, and the more common that extreme events become, with a change in rain patterns and land exploitation, the riskier that our food security becomes, which will have a detrimental impact on those on the lowest incomes. There is nothing just about this, and the direction of travel will only further divide and show inequalities.

It does not have to be that way, however. If we show the right leadership today, we can prevent further catastrophe. The next century will be dominated by necessary, ambitious climate mitigation and adaptation. This climate Bill gives Northern Ireland the tools to operate in that changing world. It will bring about the governance, the plans, the targets, the budgets, the expertise, the audits, the reviews, the duties and the commitments that have been missing for far too long. The climate emergency transcends party politics. The climate emergency does not differentiate between political viewpoints. It should unite us all to do something and everything to mitigate its worst effects.

Mr McGuigan said earlier that he is not designated an eco-warrior, but I am, in the very book that we all signed when we became MLAs. I am glad to see cross-party support for this Bill from all designations. Members, do not be fooled by the cynicism of those who have no desire to change or to do things better, because it is for them to continue to stick their head in the sand. Vested interests and denial will not save us from rising sea levels and extreme weather. Genuine partnership and cooperation among scientists, businesses, economic sectors and people will. That is what democracy and good politics looks like, and we must use effective partnerships to secure climate justice. That is exactly what the Bill does.

Many voices will urge us not to do anything too radical. We all know the usual lines that we have heard before, such as, "We need a little more time to consider things", "One mustn't rock the boat too much", "Why spend money on cutting emissions when we are only a tiny part of a huge global economy?" and the old favourite, especially in Northern Ireland with its pointing of fingers, "Sure, what about China?". The whataboutery continues with, "We have more pressing things on at the moment", "Let others do the hard work, and we can follow later" or, "We are just doing fine." Apart from the moral bankruptcy of those arguments and the fact that we are not doing just fine, if we do not invest in a low-carbon just economy now, we will be left behind, and in pretty short order. We must adjust and rethink how we treat our environment and our land and support the agriculture sector, which has been the subject of much of today's focus in the debate, but also other sectors. That is why the principles of the just transition are included in the Bill at clause 3(8) through the sectoral plans, which must:

*"(a) support jobs and growth of jobs that are climate resilient and environmentally and socially sustainable;*

*(b) support net-zero carbon investment and infrastructure;*

*(c) create work which is high-value, fair and sustainable;*

*(d) reduce inequality as far as possible;*

*(e) reduce, with a view to eliminating, poverty and social deprivation".*

For workers in any sector, that should provide reassurance that they will be supported and brought along in the switch to a low-carbon economy. With no carbon targets and incredibly poor environmental regulation, however, the people of Northern Ireland will realise too late that we can no longer compete in the green economy. That will not be their fault, but ours for failing to provide the leadership that is needed now.

I commend and thank everyone who played their part in getting the Bill to Second Stage: the coalition, the co-signatories and, especially, my party leader and colleague Clare Bailey MLA. There has been an incredible amount of hard work put into this, hardly ill considered, as some have suggested, and there is much more work to do.

I, too, have a few short words for our children and young people. This Bill is for you, for all you

young activists out there fighting for your future, demanding better and demanding action rather than just words or politicians paying lip service to your concerns and greenwashing. So, I say, well done, and thank you for protesting. Thank you for lobbying your elected reps. You may not have the ability to vote yet, but you can raise your voice loud and clear. You are engaging with democracy, and you are certainly being heard by us. We are listening, and we, too, are fighting hard so that the world that you inherit will be more secure and prosperous, where the air is cleaner, the land less polluted, and you have happier, healthier lifestyles and live in happier, healthier communities in a more just and equal world.

The time is now for the Assembly to speak with a unified voice to say that we understand the impact of climate breakdown and that we are doing something about it for the sake of those who will inherit the earth long after we are gone. This is not just about commitments made in past political agreements; this is about our shared future. A very wise man once said, "You can't fix the roof when it's raining". This climate Bill will give Northern Ireland the tools to ensure that we are watertight. Join us and fight for your children's future and vote in favour of the Bill.

**Ms Sugden:** I almost feel a bit incompetent following that great speech by Miss Woods.

I support this historic Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill. I also acknowledge the concerns because that, too, is our responsibility. This is primary legislation; it is not prescriptive. It provides a legislative basis and a mandate to build a climate policy. It is a process, not an event. A process that, I hope, will enable stakeholders from all sides of the debate to contribute to and shape that policy.

Clause 1 provides for the declaration of a climate emergency from the date of Royal Assent. It is an acknowledgement that climate change exists, and it fully supports government to address the biggest issue of our time, one that has transcended generations and which will outlive each of us. We owe it to future generations to do what we can to prevent the further decline of our environment and to give children and young people, and those yet to be born, a fighting chance of climate recovery.

Clause 2 relates to the creation of climate action plans, with details to address the challenges of climate change in Northern Ireland. A plan must be laid before the Assembly within three years of enactment of the Bill, and every five years thereafter — a clear path of action. Those plans must be

approved by the Assembly and achieve the overriding climate objective of net zero carbon. Scrutiny is the key to democracy. It is not there to undermine; it is there to improve and strengthen.

Clauses 5 to 10 and schedules 1 and 2 establish a Northern Ireland climate office and a Northern Ireland climate commissioner. It is interesting that the commissioner will be appointed by the Crown, on nomination by the Assembly, to allow maximum independence from government. That is important because it means that politics cannot come into this and that someone is dedicated to taking forward the climate needs of our society. All that demonstrates the Assembly's commitment to addressing climate change.

I represent a rural constituency in East Londonderry. A considerable number of farmers in the area have contacted me to share their concerns. Whether unfounded or not, there is genuine fear in the agricultural sector that they will be disproportionately impacted by the Bill, primarily because, they say, Northern Ireland is a livestock region. They tell me that that is due to our climate — poor weather — and our countryside not being conducive to arable farming because it is hilly and stony. Farmers say that much of our land is only good for grazing. To be honest, I really do not know, and I am not sure about it. However, I will not claim to know more about farming land than farmers do, so it is important that we listen to all stakeholders, if only to reassure them.

#### 6.45 pm

Like other Members, I have spent much time speaking with farmers and groups such as the Ulster Farmers' Union over these past few weeks. They expressed many concerns, but, in fairness, they also acknowledged the need for climate change legislation and argued that they are ahead in trying to find solutions to the climate problems. For example, a farmer in my constituency collects tyres to be reused by being processed into mattresses. He tells me that, as a main method of disposal, the majority of tyres in Northern Ireland will either end up on bonfires or on a very big bonfire across the world. Huge ships collect this waste from Belfast and take the problem elsewhere, despite the fact that a local business offers a local environmental solution. When that farmer presented his idea to statutory agencies, it was dismissed.

In another part of my constituency, a farmer is growing acres of hemp: the wonder crop for a sustainable environment. It loves Northern

Ireland's wet climate. It literally grows as if it is a weed. It improves soils, has no emissions and offsets carbon from elsewhere, such as from other industries. Even the licence to grow hemp here is free, but trying to encourage Northern Ireland government and its various agencies to see what is good for them, as well as for Northern Ireland and the environment, is incredibly frustrating.

I say all of that to demonstrate why farmers are nervous about this radical change. As a co-sponsor of the Bill, I believe that this change is good. I want to convey why it is good, but I am sympathetic to those who fear it. I suggest that the issue may be one not of climate action, but rather one of government inaction. It has taken a private Member's Bill, with very little time left in the mandate, to actually do something, because our Government have not done anything. I appreciate that the Department is developing its own legislation, and I genuinely welcome that, but if this private Member's Bill serves only to force the Government to do their job, then I am grateful to all those involved.

It should not be that way, however. The Government need to get a grip on this issue now; I know that, most Members of the House know that and the public knows that. If the Government cannot do it on their own, then this legislation will support them to do it.

I will come back to our stakeholders. It is important, as part of this process, to acknowledge their concerns, if only to reassure them, in the hope that we can strengthen this Bill and, if necessary, shape it to meet the core objective of addressing climate change. It is not in the spirit of the Bill to diminish livelihoods, to decimate the economy, to undermine the security of food supply or to remove the heart of rural communities. Rather, the Bill seeks to encourage collective responsibility for future generations.

I want farmers to contribute to the conversation so that we do not get it wrong and create unintended consequences. I want them to be part of the solution, as they have told me they already are. Can they offset carbon emissions through better countryside management schemes such as replacing all fences with hedgerows, growing out unused land and exploring new crops that are suited to NI's climate so that the net zero target is less challenging to meet than they expect? If we genuinely care about the planet in its entirety, rather than just about our very small corner of it, maybe we should stop exporting our waste. Shipping the issue away on a big boat does not remove the issue; it sends it elsewhere.

That leads me to an interesting concern raised by farmers. By reducing our food production from livestock, do we reduce our supply in spite of static or growing demand? If demand remains consistent, then where does the food come from, if not locally? Do we add to our carbon footprint if we use aeroplanes and other transport to bring it in? I am not sure about the weight of that argument, especially as intensive farming increases and more food is exported out of Northern Ireland, but it is worth exploring. I hope that this legislative process addresses that concern and reassures that significant sector of our economy. Agriculture is a significant part of the economy in Northern Ireland, and it is only fair that we listen to the sector's concerns, if not reassure it.

Ireland is well known for its grass-fed beef and dairy cattle, in contrast to the grain-fed cattle in other parts of the world. I understand that that adds to the issue. That type of farming replenishes the land, and that can help with carbon emissions. If agri-food continues to farm livestock in some form, perhaps there are better ways of doing it. Maybe that model already exists on these islands and people can learn from our model.

Carbon emissions also seem to be a problem for industrial farming, and yet, despite concerns raised over many years, we have encouraged large industrial farms across Northern Ireland, in which the only benefit to farmers is the rent of the land. As a consequence, the overproduction of manure by-product, which our lands can no longer take, is polluting our environment. These issues sit alongside driving down farmgate prices, as industrial farming increases supply with declining demand. If we want to support rural communities, protect farming families and ensure that local produce stays local to ensure security of food supply so that farmers can feed themselves and their families as well as creating a sustainable and fair livelihood, maybe the Bill needs to look at tackling industrial farming.

I will leave it there, but it is important, as I have said a number of times in my contribution, that we listen to these concerns, not to reject the Bill but to try to shape it, improve it and ensure that we get backing from all in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Justin McNulty, and I remind the Member that the Minister will be called no later than 7.00 pm.

**Mr McNulty:** Not my words, but the words of the late Dr Stephen Hawking:

*"One can see from space how the human race has changed the Earth. Nearly all of the available land has been cleared of forest and is now used for agriculture or urban development. The polar icecaps are shrinking and the desert areas are increasing. At night, the Earth is no longer dark, but large areas are lit up. All of this is evidence that human exploitation of the planet is reaching a critical limit. But human demands and expectations are ever-increasing. We cannot continue to pollute the atmosphere, poison the ocean and exhaust the land. There isn't any more available."*

These are profound words that send a chill down my spine and lay down a challenge to those of us across the globe who are elected to public office to do something about it.

I support the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill and thank Ms Bailey for her work on this issue. The planet is hotter now than it has been for at least 12,000 years, a period spanning the entire development of human civilisation, according to research, and it has not just happened by a force of nature. We, the human race, have caused this, and we, the human race, have a responsibility to change course. It is not too late, and, in the words of Greta Thunberg:

*"I have learned that you are never too small to make a difference."*

I am of the land and from the land. I was born and reared in rural south Armagh. I am a culchie and proud. I love and cherish the beauty of our natural heritage, our mountains, our landscape, our waterways and our environment. I was reared farming my uncle Patsy and my auntie Roisin's farm. I cannot begin to describe the life lessons that I learned from my upbringing on the farm of my dear uncle, God rest him. I have fond memories of taking in the hay, milking cows, calving, testing, reseeding, dosing, fencing, feeding, tagging, draining, horning, spreading bag stuff, mowing and counting cattle. I do not have such fond memories of covering the silage twice a year. I so miss the feeling of closing the byre door when the milking was finished.

Therefore, I understand and sympathise with farmers who are concerned. They are concerned that their lives and livelihoods will be impacted, but farmers want to play their part. Farmers and every other stakeholder and sector must be involved in shaping the Bill as it progresses, and they must be informed and incentivised on how they can play their part to

not only protect the environment but enhance their roles as custodians and stewards of the land. Rewilding, reforestation and species reintroduction must be incentivised or rewarded alongside traditional farming.

That said, the farming piece and the agri-food piece are only two parts of the climate change jigsaw. We all see the carnage and the damage done to our lands, our ecology and our ecosystems by the activities of the human race. Yes, part of it relates to the over-intensification of farming, but there is also over-industrialisation, traffic, the pollution of our lands and waterways by dumping of waste, the plastification of our daily lives, the dumping of smugglers' fuel waste, the impact of fossil fuels, and the exponential growth and creation of greenhouse gases. The Bill, as it progresses, must engage and encourage a cross-sectoral approach and cross-sectoral responsibility.

As a new dad, I want my son to have the same love, respect and appreciation for the land that I do, and of the sea and the delicate planet that we live on. In 20 or 30 years' time, if he asks me what I did to protect the environment, I want to be able to tell him that I did all I could. I appreciate that this issue is not without contention and that this debate may not be universally welcomed in every part of our community. As I said, I appreciate that there are concerns about lives and livelihoods. I thank all those on both sides of the argument who have contacted me. My team and I will endeavour to respond to each of them individually. However, to me, it is simple: there is no planet B.

We need to do the right thing. We need to work with communities, business and industry in order to change behaviours, practices and policies. We need to be ambitious and to build a collaborative process that brings people, stakeholders and society with us. We all need to think and act differently about what we eat and the way that we produce foods, package food and goods to transport and deal with waste. Putting up a few wind turbines, using reusable water bottles and having more electric charging points for cars, whilst important, will not be enough on their own. I want to educate the Alliance Party Member who does not know about the FASTER project; maybe he should get more up to speed with what is going on on the ground. Small, token measures will not cut through and save our planet.

Climate change is the challenge of our generation. If we are to leave this world a better place, we need to start now. Now is the time. In 20 years' time, saying "would have", "could

have" and "should have" will not have saved our environment.

I want to talk about how impressed I am by the way in which this issue has captivated and activated our young people. I am inspired by their activism, determination and impatience for change in order to make this a better place. They, rightly, see this issue as far more important than identity, culture or tradition, and they firmly challenge us to do more to protect the environment and make change happen.

When I think of our planet and our natural world, I think of Sir David Attenborough, so it is appropriate for me to finish with a quote from him:

*"Young people: They care. They know that this is the world that they're going to grow up in, that they're going to spend the rest of their lives in. But, I think it's more idealistic than that. They actually believe that humanity, human species, has no right to destroy and despoil regardless."*

The biggest threat to the environment is the belief that someone else will save it. We all must save it.

**Mr Poots:** I want to begin by highlighting, once more, that I have developed policy proposals for a balanced and evidence-based climate change Bill, but I have not been able to discuss them at the Executive, despite the fact that I have been seeking to get them on the agenda since 24 March. Once the proposals are tabled at the Executive and agreement is secured to proceed, I can quickly move to introduce the right climate change legislation for Northern Ireland, which delivers on the New Decade, New Approach commitments. I am disappointed that, despite the New Decade, New Approach agreement commitment that we would tackle climate change, I have not been able to get my proposals tabled for discussion. Those proposals have gone through due process and public consultation, which this Bill has not.

I also want to highlight one of the reasons why, compared with the rest of the UK, we did not have a climate change Bill before now. It is because the institutions were collapsed for three years by Sinn Féin and important work like this was not taken forward. People should not forget that and the fact that Sinn Féin Members put everything else on the slow burner because of their issues.

I have deep concerns about the Bill that has been brought before us today. Given those serious concerns, I cannot support it, as I

believe that it would seriously damage Northern Ireland. I have many concerns about the Bill, but I will outline the main concerns today, which each and every one of us should consider.

My first concern is the extremely important issue of the target that has been set in the Bill. It is so far removed from the independent expert advice and evidence that I cannot support it. Based on the evidence that I have received and shared widely, a target of net zero by 2045 would be extremely detrimental to our economy without actually reducing global greenhouse gas emissions. It would simply shift our emissions elsewhere. Ultimately, that would mean shifting our food production to those areas that are responsible for cutting down rainforests, which are the very lungs of the earth.

Is that really the result that you want for the people of Northern Ireland whom you represent?

**7.00 pm**

I hope that all Members will pay heed and give serious consideration to what I have to say regarding my concerns about a Bill that would be very damaging to Northern Ireland. It is a view that evidence supports. I am not simply asking Members to take my word. I want them to take into account the lack of evidence provided by the sponsor and drafters of the Bill; the existing and publicly available expert and independent evidence and advice from the UK Climate Change Committee; my consideration of responses to a proper consultation that my Department and I carried out on climate change Bill policy proposals for Northern Ireland; and my consideration of the voices of those who have contacted me and many Members in recent weeks and who would be most deeply and negatively impacted on by a target of net zero emissions by 2045, a target for which there is such a lack of evidence.

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Minister for giving way. He talks about evidence, consultation and his proposals. Can he confirm that the majority of those who responded to his consultation suggested that 2045 was the appropriate target for net zero?

**Mr Poots:** What I can confirm is the independent, science-based evidence that has been provided to my Department. If the Member wants me to ignore independent scientific advice, he should stand up and say so. *[Pause.]* OK, he does not want to.

First, the CCC has categorically stated that a net zero target by 2050 for Northern Ireland that covers all greenhouse gases cannot credibly be set at this time, let alone by 2045, as proposed in the private Member's Bill. The CCC has advised, on the basis of its evidence and analysis, that a net greenhouse gas emissions reduction target of at least 82% is an appropriate and fair contribution to a balanced pathway to a UK net zero target that aligns with the UK commitment to the Paris agreement.

We, as one country, the United Kingdom, can achieve 100% net zero. Northern Ireland, because it is a major provider of protein for people's food in the United Kingdom, does not have to meet the same target as the rest of the United Kingdom. We can move forward significantly on transport and energy. However, the high production rate in agri-food in Northern Ireland makes 100% much more challenging. For Northern Ireland to reach a net emissions reduction target of at least 82%, it needs to have a percentage reduction greater than that required in the rest of the UK to reach net zero. For example, Scotland is almost halfway to net zero emissions, having had a 45% reduction at 2018. Northern Ireland, meanwhile, is under a quarter of the way to reaching a reduction of at least 82%, having had only a 20% reduction at 2018.

A target reduction of at least 82% in no way lacks ambition. It is easier to move up towards 100% than to be locked into 100% and unable to move anywhere. The outcome of that would be the devastation of our rural communities. I look at Members across the Chamber who represent Mid Ulster, South Antrim, North Antrim, West Tyrone, East Londonderry, South Down and other areas. Do they really want a devastated rural community where tens of thousands of households lose their source of income, the food that goes on their table and the roof that goes over their head because their jobs have been removed from them? Is that what Mr McGuigan wants?

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Minister for giving way. It is important to put on record that the private Member's Bill has been taken forward in response to the Minister's lack of action. It is important also to put on record that it is not appropriate for the Minister to scaremonger in the Chamber. He is well aware that the AERA Committee will call experts to give evidence, including the CCC in which he puts so much stock. He is also aware that the carbon action plans will have to be agreed by all Assembly Members.

**Mr Poots:** I have to deal with the misleading information that the Member has just given.

He says that there is a lack of action, but my Department has gone through a full public consultation process — this Bill has not — and engaged with the public and gone through processes correctly. When I was asked to produce the Bill in three months, I said that it was impossible. It was impossible for my Department to do that because at least eight or 12 weeks is normally given for public consultation. What was being asked of me last year was not achievable. I indicated that it was not achievable. There is a saying that rushed legislation is bad legislation. That is what we are dealing with today: rushed legislation, without proper public consultation. It has, therefore, written off the rural community.

I stand here as a defender of the rural community. I stand here as a defender of the hill farmers of the Sperrins and the Antrim plateau, which Sinn Féin does not seem to care about any more. Contrary to what the proposer of the Bill suggested —.

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

**Mr Poots:** I will.

**Mr McAleer:** I want to pick up on a couple of points. The Minister cites the UK CCC comments as the only evidence on the North. There is something that I genuinely cannot get my head around. We are on the same island as the South of Ireland. We are one country. Agriculture accounts for one third of the South of Ireland's emissions; we are on 27%. Why are the experts in the South of Ireland, through Teagasc, not making those dire predictions? Why has the president of the Irish Farmers' Association in the South of Ireland said that it is pure nonsense to suggest that there will be herd cuts to achieve GHG emissions targets?

When I was out of the Chamber, I heard Clare Bailey on the television. She made the point that it is the beginning of a process rather than an event. The Committee will spend the next six months scrupulously analysing the Bill. We will get experts in and hold round-table events. We will hold public consultation exercises. Experts from across the water in Britain and from here in Ireland and, of course, other parts of the world as well will help us to reach a firm conclusion. It is a process, not an event.

**Mr Poots:** Maybe the Member should tell his Sinn Féin colleague Matt Carthy about his views. He said that if:

*"we import from countries of more intensive production such as those in South America, that is not climate action. That is hypocrisy."*

That is what your own colleague says about what you are pressing today. He said:

*"I have listened to Government representatives all throughout this debate talking about just transition and fairness for rural communities, and none of them has specified what that means in reality."*

I have listened to the same today. I agree with your Sinn Féin colleague Mr Carthy, who recognises the damage that you are doing to rural communities, particularly hill farmers. Those in marginalised lands will face the harshest cuts as a consequence of what you are backing and going into the Lobby behind me to support.

Contrary to what the proposer of the Bill suggested to the AERA Committee in a recent briefing, the CCC is clear that there is no credible pathway at this time for net zero by 2050 in Northern Ireland and that it cannot recommend such a target for Northern Ireland. It has advised that reaching net zero in 2050 would require one or both of two conditions, one being:

*"A substantial reduction in output from Northern Ireland's livestock farming sector"*

— where even a reduction of more than 50% in livestock numbers would not get us to net zero —

*"Without a corresponding reduction in consumption of such produce, this would simply shift emissions overseas"*

for no overall benefit. If we are shifting it to South America, it is estimated that it will take twice as much carbon to produce a kilogram of beef than it would if the beef were produced in Northern Ireland.

Why do you want to devastate our rural landscape? Why do you want to devastate our rural fabric? Why do you want to devastate our rural communities and then import beef from an area that is producing it with twice as much carbon going into the atmosphere as would go in if we produced it in Northern Ireland? I will give way to anybody who wishes to answer that.

**Mr McAleer:** Can I ask —?

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

**Mr Speaker:** Order, please. I remind Members to address their remarks through the Chair.

**Mr McAleer:** The Minister quoted Lord Deben and the UK CCC as the experts. I do not take away from the fact that they are experts. Does he also accept Lord Deben's message that, if we do not sign up to climate legislation, we will be punished by the rest of the world?

Does he not accept that, given that a lot of our agri-food is produced across the island of Ireland, we are sending the wrong message to the rest of the world that the North is not committed to climate change legislation as required by the Paris agreement whereas the South of Ireland is?

**Mr Poots:** That is exactly why we are signing up to legislation. That is why I have been waiting for six weeks — almost seven weeks now — for that legislation to be allowed through the Executive. Your own colleagues are holding it back. Let us get it out here to debate it. Let us have the legislation that was publicly consulted on put in front of you and ensure that we drive this forward.

Not every part of the United Kingdom will achieve 100%. Some areas will have sinks, which will achieve a greater percentage, while other areas will not. We happen to be one of those areas that is engaged in producing high levels of food for the United Kingdom and beyond. We produce around 10% of the United Kingdom's protein. It is something that we have exported very successfully, and we are doing extremely well, with a low carbon footprint for the number of kilograms of beef and litres of milk produced. The Climate Change Committee letter states:

*"a much greater than equitable share of all UK greenhouse gas removal technologies being located in Northern Ireland compared to the size of Northern Ireland's current emissions, population, land area or economy"*

would be both costly and suboptimal. It has identified the costs of reaching net zero by 2050 as being:

*"higher than those of the recommended 82% reduction target ... by up to £900 million per year by 2050".*

Ms Bailey did not give any figures, but there are figures there. I pose these questions: where

does the £900 million come from? Does it come from the Department of Health, the Department of Education or the Department for Infrastructure? From which Department are you going to take that additional funding? We are going to have to invest heavily in the first instance, and that is a further £900 million per annum that you are going to walk through the Lobbies for very shortly. Before you do it, I repeat the questions: from where is that money coming? From which Department do you want to take it? From which service do you want to take it? That is important.

Reaching net zero by 2045 would have even greater cost implications, and we have no evidence from this private Member's Bill of what the costs might be, as its co-sponsors have not provided any sort of economic impact assessment. In fact, I have seen no evidence of any impact assessments, such as an economic needs assessment or, indeed, a rural needs assessment, having been carried out on the Bill. Although it may not be fully possible to identify the cost implications of reaching net zero by 2045, there is enough independent expert evidence available about the likely significant impacts of such a target, particularly for the agriculture sector. For example, even based on the "at least 82%" net emissions reduction by 2050, the CCC has indicated that significant investments are required, such as low-carbon capital investment and the need to scale up to £1 billion to £1.5 billion a year by 2030 in Northern Ireland. Your proposal is to put another £900 million a year on top of that. Those are the sorts of figures that we are talking about: close to £2.5 billion per annum that has to be found out of the Northern Ireland block.

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

**Mr Poots:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** The Minister has vast experience in this Building, and he knows that we are only at the initial stage with this.

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member use the microphone, please?

**Mr Wells:** Most people can hear me, Mr Speaker, but most people do not want to hear me.

**Mr Speaker:** It will not be reported by Hansard unless you speak into the microphone.

**Mr Wells:** The Minister has vast experience in this Building. We are only at the initial stage of

the process. He knows from experience that the Bill is going to go through Committee, where Mr McAleer and his team will dissect it line by line. It will come back here, probably in a very different form, after that process, and there will be a whole series of amendments made to it. Today is only about accepting the concept and principle of the Climate Change Bill and accepting that we have to have one. Indeed, would the Minister be suggesting his climate change Bill at all, if the private Member's Bill had not arrived on the scene?

**7.15 pm**

**Mr Poots:** Absolutely, because the work was being done on it. We were doing the work to go out to public consultation before the private Member's Bill was brought forward. The wise thing to do is ensure that a Bill goes through the Executive and out to the Northern Ireland public so that it has been done properly, in that it has gone through the public consultation process that has been so neatly ignored by the sponsors of this Bill.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Minister for giving way. He talks much about public consultation. Can he confirm that he does not support any private Member's Bill being introduced in the House without that type of consultation prior to its introduction?

**Mr Poots:** The Member has asked a question. I have raised the issue of public consultation. The Bill will affect every person in Northern Ireland, given the costs associated with it and its impact. It will particularly affect the rural community. Therefore, I find the appropriateness of bringing forward legislation without any consultation with that community challenging. Maybe the Member thinks that the rural community does not matter; I happen to think that it does and will defend it, irrespective of the Member's views.

I go back to my earlier point. On the basis of the CCC's — I am not getting on very well with this speech, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** I will take the opportunity to remind you that you have confirmed that you would finish your remarks at 7.30 pm.

**Mr Poots:** OK, right. I need to get on with it and stop taking interventions.

To go back to an earlier point, on the basis of the CCC's evidence, the aim of net zero in Northern Ireland by 2050 would mean every sector doing more than it has projected in its

balanced pathway projections to UK net zero. On top of that, even a further reduction of 50% to Northern Ireland's livestock would not get us to net zero. To put it simply, to get to net zero by 2045, as proposed by the Bill, the livestock sector would have to shrink dramatically to, basically, a non-existent level, which is unacceptable. Northern Ireland plays an important food production role for the UK, with nearly 50% of Northern Ireland's agri-food produce being consumed in the rest of the UK. The target in the Bill disregards and threatens that important role. As the CCC has said, going beyond its recommendation of a target of at least 82% to a target of net zero by 2045 will, most simply, move agri-food production elsewhere for no overall global benefit. That has to be accepted tonight: no overall global benefit.

When briefing the Agriculture Committee, the Bill's sponsor indicated, with regard to dairy, that any reduction in what is produced in Northern Ireland for the purposes of reducing emissions could be offset by increasing production in western Europe or New Zealand — simply exporting the problem. I struggle to see how that could have a positive impact on either the dairy sector or global emissions, given the high-quality food production standards that we have in Northern Ireland. It should be noted that 65% of our farmland is best suited to growing grass for animals. We are well placed to deliver sustainable food. I ask this again: why would we export production when greenhouse gas emissions from UK beef are about half the global average?

I reiterate that the CCC has made it clear that one of the main risks of Northern Ireland pushing towards a more ambitious target than it has recommended through making a substantial reduction in output from the livestock sector is that, without a corresponding reduction in the consumption of such produce, we would simply shift emissions overseas and not reduce emissions globally. Climate change is a global challenge, not just a local one. We all need to recognise that.

My role is to protect and enhance the environment in a sustainable way and to ensure that the agriculture sector thrives as the custodian of the environment. That should be the aim of every Member. We should, therefore, not promote actions and pass legislation that would prevent us fulfilling that responsibility. The CCC has also stated that, at present, a net zero target for Northern Ireland set for 2050 or earlier, rather than contributing to extra overall reductions in UK greenhouse gas emissions, could simply shift a greater share of the UK-

wide costs of reaching net zero to Northern Ireland. I ask all of you this: who will pay the extra costs that Northern Ireland will have to bear? Are there not better activities that we could spend that money on while the UK still reaches the net zero target? The potential additional costs and impacts of achieving a net zero emissions reduction target by 2045 in Northern Ireland, as opposed to the target of at least 82% by 2050 that the CCC has recommended, could, therefore, be extensively more significant. The economic impact on sectors would also be much more substantial than in the rest of the UK.

Some may be of the opinion that, because of the agriculture sector in Northern Ireland, we cannot achieve net zero. However, I want to dispel the rhetoric that the target given by the Climate Change Committee of at least 82% is there just to protect agriculture. The CCC's advice is that, even if agricultural methane emissions were removed from the supplementary target, the Northern Ireland 2050 target would still be only a 93% reduction in emissions. There are other reasons, one of which is the number of people who live in rural communities and rely on either oil or coal heating. That is something that seems, again, to be ignored by Members from across the House who allegedly represent rural communities.

The memorandum accompanying the private Member's Bill includes a reference to just transition principles and objectives that sectoral plans in the Bill should deliver. That was also highlighted at the Committee briefing by the Bill sponsor as something that would provide protection and support for sectors. From the independent evidence and advice that I have received from the CCC, it is not clear how such a net zero by 2045 target would or, indeed, could deliver a just transition in Northern Ireland for sectors including the agricultural sector and the rural community.

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

**Mr Poots:** Yes.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Minister advise what the budget that has been spoken about for the just transition is?

**Mr Poots:** No budget has come from the sponsors of the Bill, but the advice that we have received is that it would cost up to £2.5 billion per annum.

As I have stated, the CCC has made it clear that a 2045 net zero target would not represent a balanced pathway for Northern Ireland to reduce emissions. In addition to significant reductions in our agricultural output, there could be perverse outcomes if Northern Ireland were to attempt to go too fast in reducing emissions. For example, going beyond the natural rate of stock turnover would lead to a premature scrapping of assets. That could be costly and would risk undermining popular support for transition, and the CCC has said that it could cause increased embedded emissions and unfair distributional impacts, particularly if Northern Ireland targets were out of line with HM Treasury actions to support a just transition to the UK target.

When briefing the AERA Committee, the sponsor of the Bill indicated that the Bill would compensate farmers and agri-industry. I see nothing in the Bill that would specifically and effectively deliver on that. Yet another bland and blank promise with no evidence to support it. In recent evidence to the AERA Committee, the Bill's sponsor indicated that the Bill does not set specific targets for sectors or dates and deadlines. She said that it is a framework Bill and:

*"there is nothing in the Bill that will harm the agriculture sector."*

Motherhood and apple pie.

While the Bill contains elements that set out a framework for developing plans and the scrutiny of them, the inclusion of the net zero target effectively means that all sectors, including the agriculture sector, will have to aim for close to net zero emissions by 2045. That will obviously have a significant impact on all sectors, and, as I have stated before, the agriculture sector in particular. This is clearly not just a framework Bill, but some are trying to say it does not really mean what all the agriculture bodies say it means. Let us call it for what it is.

The suggestion that the Bill will not harm the agriculture sector is plainly wrong. It is not backed by evidence and advice from the CCC and is not a view shared by the companies and people who work in the agriculture sector, many of whom have been writing to me and, indeed, other Members to express concerns about the impact of the Bill. The Bill sponsor, in evidence to the Committee, indicated that she hoped that, when the first climate action plan under the Bill was being implemented in several years' time:

*"we can start to create baselines and get the real information on the full extent of what we need to be grappling with in Northern Ireland."*

That further highlights that the target in the Bill is based on blind ambition rather than any actual evidence.

I share the desire to strive for environmental excellence and sustainability and to tackle the issue of climate change head on, but targets should be ambitious and realistic and based on the most relevant high-quality and independent advice that takes account of the specific factors relevant to Northern Ireland. There is also a restriction in the Bill that prevents the headline 2045 zero emissions target being amended to a date beyond 2045. That does not allow for flexibility to take on board the emerging issues that Mr McAleer referred to or a changing understanding of the evidence and the science, and it is not consistent with climate change legislation elsewhere.

The proposals in the private Member's Bill contrast with the proposals that I have made to my Executive colleagues, which they are considering. They would result in legislation that sets ambitious and evidence-based targets, is forward-thinking and provides flexibility and scope to amend those targets as a result of emerging evidence and understanding, new advice, new technology and other advancements. Eighty-two per cent is a minimum; it is not a target. It is achievable, unlike what is being put to us at the minute.

Despite previous claims by the sponsors of the Bill regarding consultation, there has not been credible evidence presented of a proper consultation having been undertaken on the Bill. While that is permissible, it is a serious oversight. On the basis of what has been provided and communicated, it appears that views were limited only to members and supporters of the organisations responsible for developing and bringing the Bill forward. That is not a substitute for proper consultation and giving everyone, including those who will be heavily impacted, the right to comment on proposals before legislation is tabled, debated and rushed through. It is highly unacceptable. Climate change affects everyone, and everyone in Northern Ireland should have their say on what climate change legislation should look like.

It is clear to me that, despite what the Bill sponsor indicated to the AERA Committee, there is little or no support for the Bill in the agriculture sector. The agri-food sector is fully behind the need to address global warming and

reduce emissions and is already making serious advances. However, it cannot support a Bill for net zero by 2045 because it is not evidence-based. It has not been properly consulted on or assessed for its impact. It does not recognise the importance of our agri-food sector or the people who work in it as a net producer of high-quality food. Many companies and people who work in the agriculture sector have written to me and other MLAs expressing their concerns about the impact of the Bill. They have also written to my Executive colleagues urging them to support the Bill that I have proposed, which awaits approval.

The sponsors and drafters of the Bill have indicated that they have plans to advance their consultation activities as the Bill progresses and hope that the consultation process for the Bill can take place during Committee Stage. That is not an acceptable or appropriate way to legislate. The approach of early and inclusive consultation is more likely to lead to better outcomes and greater acceptance in the community — Mr Wells asked me about that — particularly amongst stakeholders who may be adversely affected by the policy.

The handling of the Bill before us today has not afforded everyone a fair opportunity to have their say in a timely manner, and, as I said, rushed legislation is generally poor legislation. I would go so far as to say confidently that, on the basis of the information and evidence that I have received, the Bill before us today does not consider real-world impacts. I question whether the sponsor Member and the co-sponsors of the Bill even know or understand the real-world impacts of the Bill that they have brought before us today. That is on the basis of their complete disregard of the UK CCC's expert independent advice on an effective, appropriate and achievable emissions reduction target for Northern Ireland. Also, I base the assertion on their lack of proper consultation and their failure to produce or attempt to produce any sort of impact assessments, whether regulatory, economic, rural or human rights.

Put simply and in summary, the 2045 net zero target before us today is not based on any evidence, analysis or feasibility. It goes against the principles of making good, sound legislation. We have independent scientific advice that delivers ambitious targets, yet we disregard the evidence. Given the lack of detail and evidence in the Bill, I feel that it is very much style over substance, but, to be fair, the Bill has neither. I am supportive of climate change action. I have a Bill that is awaiting Executive approval. This private Member's Bill will have negative impacts on all Northern

Ireland businesses, but, as I have highlighted, agriculture is disproportionately impacted. In contrast, my Department consulted on policy options for climate change legislation for Northern Ireland and has been using this and the expert advice provided to strike the right balance between ambition and realism.

I want to raise another concern about the Bill, which is the duties and functions placed on Departments and other bodies in the Bill. For example, the role envisaged in the Bill for the Executive Office does not appear to fall within its current functions. It is also not clear whether there are adequate resources in the Department to undertake the range of functions envisaged or whether any consultation has taken place with the Executive Office on the potential role that it will have. I ask the Member whether she or her co-sponsors have engaged TEO on that. Have they asked whether those duties can be fulfilled under the current structures? Are there adequate resources and expertise? Does the Bill not place any duties on my Department or any other Northern Ireland Department to provide input to the Executive Office to enable it to fulfil its duties? What engagement has the Bill sponsor had with CCC in respect of the new functions that the Bill places on it? Can it be resourced to carry those out?

The CCC's advice is considered to be an essential element by the Bill's sponsors, yet they completely ignore the advice from the CCC

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**7.30 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Minister to wind up his remarks.

**Mr Poots:** Thank you.

— on its key aspect, which is the long-term greenhouse gas emissions target. Is the spirit of the Bill just to cherry-pick the advice and evidence that suits and to disregard any sound or impartial evidence?

I could say more, Mr Speaker, but I respect your call. I oppose the Bill as it is currently proposed.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Clare Bailey to conclude and wind up the debate. You have until 8.00 pm at the latest.

**Ms Bailey:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Members for their engagement on the Climate Change Bill. Many interesting issues were

raised. I hope that, as the Bill moves through its legislative stages in the Assembly, that engagement will continue to be constructive so that we can strengthen and enhance the Bill, as many said. I am also more than willing to continue to work across the House in order to get the Bill passed. The pantomime of plenary politics is of much less interest to me than getting the actual work done.

Some common themes arose in the debate. I am pleased that there is general consensus on the need for sustainable decarbonisation for Northern Ireland and for continued democratic oversight and robust independent auditing of that process. The Bill provides that. While some of the discussion naturally veered into areas of policy, I restate that the Bill is a framework that will mandate action across all sectors and Departments. It is not prescriptive and does not dictate policy. All future policy will be for Ministers and the Executive to bring forward in climate action plans. That would be the perfect place for an economic stability policy for our hill farmers, for example, to be produced. That was one example that was raised by the Minister.

The target of net zero by 2045 reflects the general legislative trend towards stronger climate legislation, with the proven context that we are living in an interconnected climate and ecological emergency. Urgent action is needed in order to limit global temperature increases and prevent runaway climate change. At the UK and international levels, we need strong targets to allow us to keep pace with constantly moving goalposts. Northern Ireland cannot afford to be a laggard in the UK. If and when the UK decides to accelerate its targets and ambition, just as we saw last month when Prime Minister Boris Johnson increased the UK's emissions reduction target to 78% by 2035 — that is almost in line with the UUP manifesto — we will be on the wrong path to adapt to that.

I have heard many quotes from the CCC's letter to Minister Poots on the setting of net zero targets. The letter also states:

*"As new evidence on climate science, behaviours or low-carbon technologies (particularly in low-carbon farming measures) emerges and/or the UK's international climate commitments change, it may be prudent to tighten a 2050 target in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's climate legislation should allow emissions reductions to go beyond our current assessment by requiring at least an 82% reduction, and should contain clear provisions to tighten the target if there is evidence to support such a decision."*

I am still quoting the CCC; these are not my words. It continues:

*"We have already seen similar provisions used to increase climate targets for the UK, Scotland and Wales since 2019."*

In recent communications with the Minister on the economic implications of setting and delivering a 2050 emissions target for Northern Ireland, the CCC was abundantly clear when it stated:

*"Business models that are not compatible with a Net Zero future are increasingly risky."*

The CCC's report also acknowledges the 50% reduction in herd size, which is not in our Bill, and recommends that it is based on available evidence. However, there are ways to reduce emissions without reducing herd sizes, and that is what we want to explore.

Watching the rest of the UK and our neighbours in the Republic forge ahead with net zero climate targets, hoping that we can just opt out and keep our heads down, is not a viable strategy for Northern Ireland, and it will cause us problems in future. The EU, the Republic of Ireland and even the US will set net zero targets. Most developed countries in the world have set a net zero target. A recent court ruling in Germany saw it increase its ambition from 2050 to 2045. Wales has set a net zero target that goes beyond the CCC's recommendation of 95% by 2050. Is Northern Ireland really the only place that cannot do it?

If we are to set ourselves a limit and a lower bar, who are we requiring to do even more than their fair share in order for the UK to be net zero? Are we asking England to pick up our missing slack? Are we asking Scotland or Wales? What have they said in response? Can they do it? If the Republic works to a net zero target and we do not, what will the transboundary impacts be? Will there be legal implications?

The Climate Change Committee is a respected committee of experts, and we look forward to working closely with it on the Bill. When it gave the Minister the 82% target, it was based on current economic models, not as a stopping point but as an absolute target that we can no longer argue that we cannot achieve. It continues to encourage us to go that little bit further and be that little bit more ambitious.

There are questions about the CCC's proposed modelling for agriculture and concerns that it

has not explored many pathways for low-carbon farming. Its sixth carbon budget acknowledges that the greenhouse gas impacts of less-intensive farming, or agroecology methods, are not included in its scenarios. It states that that is:

*"due to the lack of robust evidence".*

That was mentioned by Philip McGuigan earlier in the debate. How would any credible expert predict pathways without robust evidence? There is evidence, though, to show that less-intensive farming has the potential to be extremely beneficial to the achievement of our target without the large-scale output cuts modelled by the CCC.

I look forward to Committee Stage as an opportunity to explore those issues in more detail. The Committee has already heard from nature-friendly farmers on the matter, and they have identified the lack of finance currently available to them for their wider sustainability measures. There are other issues to explore further.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Member for giving way. Will she note that Unite and others who represent farmers and food producers have raised concerns that the scrapping of the Agricultural Wages Board would place people who are already in precarious situations in further danger of low pay? The Minister has proposed to do that while claiming fake and faux concern about people in that sector. Does the Member agree with that?

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Member for the intervention. Indeed, I have met the union on that issue and will continue to engage with it. Yes, it does cause alarm.

Mr Wells, for one, was very eloquent in outlining that the lobbying that, no doubt, we have all had over the past few days has been in UFU emails. Of course we are listening and will continue to listen to it. I reiterate that there is nothing in the Bill that will harm agriculture. Agriculture is listed, along with all other sectors, as an area that needs to see reductions in emissions. It is not the Bill saying that. Rather, it is the world in which we live. Nothing in the Bill mandates any immediate changes to the sector. The way in which the climate action plans are designed, with a carbon budget over five years but with no specific reduction targets given to individual sectors, means that those sectors that are ready to move immediately can do the heavy lifting over the first few years, with a more gradual transition for other sectors. Members

should note that support for the Bill has been received from many sectors. Indeed, we have also been criticised by some for not being ambitious enough.

As we begin to roll out climate action plans and learn how to measure and collect robust evidence, and as that is overseen by independent outside commissioners and offices and is reported on to the Assembly for debate and scrutiny, I cannot see how we will be in the same place in five years' time, never mind 25 years' time, when we get to 2045. The Bill ensures that fairness will be built into any measures that are introduced. Sectoral plans will have to create high-value, fair work and reduce poverty and inequality, so job creation strategies will also be an essential component of any climate action plans.

We do, however, need to look at the social and environmental sustainability of farming in Northern Ireland. Not all farmers are opposed to the Bill. It is surprising that any MLA would cite climate action as the biggest threat to farmers when, in fact, departmental policies that are in place right now have seen farm numbers fall year-on-year, bargaining power given over to supermarkets and the position of farmers in the value chain constantly eroded. I have to wonder whether the concerns are about farming families or agri-corporations. We need a new deal for Northern Ireland farmers that encourages young people to take up farming and ensures a profitable and sustainable industry for them in the decades ahead in which they are paid for sustainable and climate-friendly practice. It is not our position that we want to see fewer farmers. We would like to see all sizes of farms — small, medium and large — survive and thrive. It is not the Bill that is a threat to farmers. Business as usual under current departmental policy is the real threat. It is therefore time for a green new deal and to build back better for everyone.

When we look at the costs associated with the Bill, we see that the immediate costs are for setting up the Northern Ireland climate office, including the climate commissioner and staff, and will be mainly for salaries and pensions.

The climate commissioner's powers and remit are modelled on those of the Public Services Ombudsman, including clause 6(8) that Mr Allister was speaking to. In my opinion, the ombudsman and that office are working pretty well. I have a meeting with them pretty soon, and I am looking forward to that.

7.45 pm

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

**Ms Bailey:** Certainly.

**Mr Wells:** Many Members were taken by the evidence given by Mr Allister on the pay and status of the commissioner and on the lack of accountability, given that the commissioner is to be appointed by the Assembly Commission rather than by any particular Department. Is the Member prepared to meet those concerns halfway during Committee Stage or is she wedded to the structure that she has articulated?

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I am wedding —. Sorry. I will never be wedding. I am wedded to full independence for the commissioner and for the office, and I am happy to continue talking and looking at other models. We looked at the provisions and at how the Public Services Ombudsman in particular was established, and we have modelled what is contained in this Bill on that. I am more than happy, however, to keep talking to the Member about it if he has anything more that we wants to bring to me.

We have also sought the Finance Minister's recommendation for setting up the commissioner's office, and we are engaging with him on that issue. It is important that the funding for it come out of the Consolidated Fund, as the climate commissioner role is intended to be a permanent position. We thank the Minister for his engagement thus far.

More broadly, the climate action plans will have financial implications, but they go beyond the immediate remit of the Bill. Achieving net zero will involve significant investment, and it is foolish to consider that even an 82% reduction, as is preferred by the Minister, would not also require significant investment and significant change. There are huge economic opportunities involved in unlocking green investment and green jobs. For example, the National Grid has said the UK will need to recruit over 400,000 people to jobs to build the net zero energy workforce, and almost 14,000 of those jobs will be here in Northern Ireland. I refer again to the CCC's letter to the Minister, in which it stresses in its response:

*"The greatest risks are associated with failing to act quickly enough. Delays to action are likely to increase global climate risk, increase uncertainty for businesses and households, lead to unnecessary costs in future, and could lead to Northern Ireland*

*missing out on the benefits of climate investment that takes place elsewhere in the UK."*

We must also consider the cost of inaction. Damages avoided, such as through climate action, must be compared with the cost of meeting targets. The cost of action has been estimated at 1% to 2% of GDP. Inaction, on the other hand, could lead to a reduction in global GDP of 10% by 2050 and of 25% by the end of the century.

I will now deal with the issue of consultation, which some Members raised. I hope that Members are aware of the legislative process for private Members' Bills, where there is no requirement to consult at this stage. I also remind Members, perhaps those opposing this Bill, that, had the Minister introduced legislation, as he was supposed to, it would not have been necessary to introduce climate change legislation as a private Member's Bill. This Bill has adhered to exactly the same process as all other private Members' Bills that have been brought through the House and all other private Members' Bills that are currently awaiting introduction.

To reinforce my point on the issue of consultation, the majority of respondents to the recent DAERA consultation were in favour of a net zero target by 2045, as Philip McGuigan said. Those numbers were discounted in the Department's response. Maybe that would be an advisable approach that we should all employ. Maybe all the co-sponsors of the Bill should employ that approach, with the email campaigns and lobbying that we are getting. However, I cannot imagine that any one of us would agree that that would be a fair way forward.

I look forward to the Committee Stage as an opportunity to gather further evidence and to engage with a wide range of stakeholders so that the Bill can be strengthened as it advances. We are determined that this will be a collaborative process, and we have met groups from many sectors, including energy, transport, infrastructure, agriculture, rural communities. Most, though not all, have been broadly supportive. We will continue to engage.

By way of reassurance, I point out that every climate action plan will have a rural needs impact assessment carried out, as provided for under the Rural Needs Act 2016. What rural communities tell me they need now is clean air, for example, instead of the ammonia-laden air that they have been breathing for years. They want clean waterways and an end to constant,

repeated pollution. They want jobs, transport and sustainable futures.

Let me quote from an email that I received today from an organisation in a rural area:

*"Climate change represents the most complex challenge of our time."*

They want their:

*"children and grandchildren to have the opportunity to live their lives in vibrant, sustainable, rural communities."*

They say:

*"The responsibility is on us all now to take action."*

The last line of their email reads:

*"There is nothing to fear from being ambitious and proactively building a better future."*

I am pleased that there is a majority consensus in the Chamber for the principles of the Bill and also for the need for urgent climate action.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states that global warming is likely to reach 1.5°C between 2030 and 2052. If we continue to emit greenhouse gases at the current rate, we will reach the point of catastrophic change by 2070. The multi-organisation report, 'United in Science', stresses that current emission trends are not compatible with limiting temperature increases to 1.5°C, and certainly not to anything well below 2°C.

The last decade of political failure and inaction on climate change has cost us dear, shrinking the window for action by two thirds. Those 10 years are key. Wherever you stand on targets or approaches, one thing is undeniable: we must start now.

Mr Speaker, I want to thank the co-sponsors of the Bill. I am aware that co-sponsors are not recognised in Assembly processes, but the fact that they are here and signed up shows that efforts have been made to do things differently with the Bill. I thank Philip McGuigan, Mark Durkan, Steve Aiken, John Blair, Gerry Carroll, Claire Sugden and Trevor Lunn. I thank you all for stepping up, for being brave, and for your support.

I know that Jim Wells engaged with the Climate Coalition also. Thank you for that, Mr Wells.

I hope that we can vote through the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill for Northern Ireland, 2021.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I put the Question, I remind Members that, in the event of a Division, they should be mindful of their social-distancing obligations while voting.

*Question put.*

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 58; Noes 29.*

### **AYES**

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Beattie, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Wells, Miss Woods.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Carroll and Miss Woods*

### **NOES**

*Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Givan and Mr Harvey*

*The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:*

*Mr Blair voted for Ms Armstrong, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.*

*Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne,*

*Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan [Teller, Noes], Mr Harvey [Teller, Noes], Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.*

*Mr Butler voted for Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.*

*Ms Ennis voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.*

*Mr O'Toole voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.*

*Ms Bailey voted for Mr Lunn.*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill [NIA 19/17-22] be agreed.*

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the Second Stage of the Climate Change Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

*Adjourned at 8.18 pm.*

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