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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 10 September 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Members' Statements

Mr Speaker: Members wishing to make a statement should indicate that by rising in their place. The usual rules apply.

Jackie Hewitt MBE

Mr Kingston: I rise to pay tribute to the life and work of Jackie Hewitt MBE, who made a massive contribution to community development in the greater Shankill area and beyond. When I commenced work for the Greater Shankill Community Council in 1997, Jackie was its chairman and a stalwart of the community. He was a key driver of Farset Youth and Community Development on the Springfield Road; Farset Enterprise Park; Farset urban farm; and the Farset international hostel.

It was Jackie who proposed that we establish the 'Shankill Mirror' community newspaper in 1999, which I managed for seven years. Jackie was a key board member and wrote most of the editorial columns at that time. The newspaper continues today. Along with Jackie Redpath, he established the Greater Shankill Community Convention in 2001, bringing together the entire community after a time of division.

Jackie Hewitt was a key member of Ainsworth Community Residents Association and a local housing association. He had been manager of the Woodvale Youth Training Project and the Woodvale Action for Community Employment (ACE) project. He was also prominent in the Ireland funds, the Forum for Action on Substance Abuse (FASA) and the support group that was established to assist the families of those killed and injured in the 1993 Shankill bomb. He was instrumental in the cross-border Farset/Inishowen and Border Counties Initiative, which included a focus on remembering those who served in the First World War, including linking with the Mayor of Drogheda, Sean Collins.

Jackie was active in the Orange Institution, including serving as district master of Belfast No. 3 District for one year. He was also a key instigator of the Thiepval Memorial Loyal Orange Lodge No. 1916, promoting the memory of the Orange contribution at the Battle of the Somme. He was also active in the Cavehill/Oldpark branch of the Royal British Legion, assisting with and fundraising for two memorials to the three Scottish soldiers.

During my year as Lord Mayor of Belfast in 2017, I hosted the Greater Shankill BEST awards at City Hall. I was delighted that Jackie Hewitt was selected to receive the lifetime achievement award. I had the honour of presenting the award to Jackie, who attended with his wife, Glenda.

At Jackie's funeral service last month, their daughter, Helen, led the tributes.

Among her memories was one of Jackie interrupting a family holiday to France in the 1980s, because he wanted to visit an old tower that was in a neglected condition. That, of course, was the Ulster Memorial Tower at Thiepval, which was officially opened in 1921 to commemorate the fallen of the 36th (Ulster) Division in the Battle of the Somme. Jackie established the Farset Somme Project, which successfully lobbied to have the memorial refurbished. Jackie was also instrumental in founding the Somme Association, which manages the Ulster Memorial Tower and the visitors' centre beside it. It owns Thiepval Wood as well as the Somme Museum at Conlig in County Down.

I send deepest sympathies to his wife, Glenda; their daughter, Helen, and her husband, William; Jackie's grandson, David; the entire family circle —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Kingston: — and Jackie's many close friends.

Ulster GAA For All Tournament

Mr Kearney: Last Saturday, the Ulster GAA For All tournament took place at Kickhams GAC Creggan in south Antrim. It was an absolutely brilliant event. GAA For All sums up everything that is best about Cumann Lúthchleas Gael [*Translation: the Gaelic Athletic Association*]. It creates the space for the most special people in our community to participate, be valued and be the best that they can be in taking part in our national games. Ulster GAA and Kickhams GAC have done amazing work to promote inclusion in our games for children and young people with special and additional needs. I pay huge thanks to both for all their endeavours.

The organisation of the programme on Saturday was exemplary, with 23 teams from across Ulster participating. The attention to detail was exceptional, including the provision of a sensory room in the club pavilion. The biggest shout-out, however, must go to the players and the participants. Every one of them is a GAA all-star. I also acknowledge the important role of their parents, guardians and all their clubs that supported them. To top it off, the weather was absolutely wonderful. Kickhams GAC cannot claim credit for that, but it deserves recognition for being one of the best clubs in Ireland. Admhaím, ar ndóighe, go bhfuil mé rud beag claonta ar an ábhar sin. I admit, of course, to being slightly biased on that point. Mar fhocal scoir, tá Ciceam an Chreagáin ag ceiliúradh 100 bliain ar an saol, agus go máire siad an céad eile.

[Translation: To conclude, Creggan Kickham's GAC is celebrating its 100th year, and may it live to see another century.]

Finally, Kickham's GAC is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year, so here is to the next 100 years of promoting Gaelic games, building community and promoting inclusion.

Waste Water Infrastructure

Mr McMurray: I rise to speak about the dire state of our waste water infrastructure. Over the past few weeks, we have seen a number of reports on the devastating impact that our inadequate waste water infrastructure has on our environment, on housebuilding, on public health and on the wider economy. I will highlight two examples

Last Wednesday, we heard about the catastrophic pollution affecting bathing waters in Newcastle, along with many other areas along our coast. In 2023, the 80 monitored

storm overflows were recorded to have discharged in total for more hours than there are in a year. Those are only the monitored storm overflows, of which there are 2,400, so the actual picture could be much worse. Our waste water infrastructure is not up to standard. It just cannot cope, and our rivers, lakes and sea are paying the price. Such spills are supposed to be exceptional, but they are de facto the norm now. Those revelations came just days after the Office for Environmental Protection published its report on the unsatisfactory state of water quality in Northern Ireland.

Secondly, a few weeks ago, we learned that the development of nearly 20,000 properties has practically ground to a halt in 23 cities, towns and villages across Northern Ireland, because the waste water system is at capacity. That impacts homes, schools, medical facilities and businesses. It is terrible news for the many people who are looking for a home, for our economy and for all of us who are suffering from the squeeze on our education and health systems.

The root cause of the crisis lies in Northern Ireland Water's funding model. It cannot borrow to invest, and it has been left with the price control for 2021-27, which is not fully funded. The impact of that on our environmental, economic, ecological and public health is intolerable. The substantial infrastructure works that are needed to address the huge problems that we see now are difficult to plan and fund in those conditions. Unfortunately, the result is not just a standstill but deterioration.

While Alliance is clear that we do not support privatisation or new water charges, NI Water's funding model is unsustainable and unfit for purpose. Alliance wants to see a plan of action from the Minister, advised by the Fiscal Council, that will deliver desperately needed investment, and one option will be to explore mutualisation so that NI Water can borrow to invest. I will continue to work with those who want to develop solutions to the problems, and I look forward to further correspondence with the Department on these matters.

South Belfast Community Events

Mr O'Toole: On Saturday, we had a glorious day in Ormeau park. The sun was so strong, and it was so balmy. As one of those people who normally have to shelter under the awning of the beautiful oak and elm trees in Ormeau park, I put on my factor 50 and was there as a

participant and volunteer at an amazing community festival called "Ballynafest".

I want to reflect on Ballynafest and the amazing hard work of the volunteers. It is entirely volunteer-led, and it was a wonderful, glorious community day. There was a range of activities, including music, a petting zoo and circus entertainers. That part of South Belfast is cross-community in the traditional sense that we mean it in Northern Ireland, and it is a gloriously diverse community, with people from a range of national and ethnic backgrounds and people of all ages and all classes and creeds, and it was a day that allowed that community to come together in Ormeau park. It really brought out the absolute best of that part of South Belfast, which is a place that I am proud to call "home" and proud to represent as my constituency. People from that greater Ormeau Road area, including Ballynafeigh, Rosetta and Ravenhill, came together and had a wonderful day. It really was driven by people in that community. There was relatively limited support from Belfast City Council, but a lot of elbow grease, creativity and imagination went into it, and it really exemplified the best of that community. I say a huge "Thank you and well done" to the organisers and everyone who participated.

I also want to flag other community festivals in South Belfast. "Open Botanic" is happening this weekend. Botanic is an area that is also gloriously and wonderfully diverse, and people from across the world have come and made their home in the Botanic, greater Holyland and university area. There will be a day of community activity in Botanic, and I encourage people to come along. Unfortunately, I doubt that we will have the glorious weather that we had last Saturday in Ormeau park, but, no doubt, it will be a special day. Again, that event is an exemplification of what makes South Belfast so special, and it sits in stark contrast to some of the hate that we saw this summer. That event is what South Belfast and Belfast in general are and should be all about.

I also want to reflect on Lowe Memorial Church in Finaghy, which has a glorious annual fun day. They too had a really successful day on Saturday and got a great day for it. Lowe Memorial Church is another great community institution in Finaghy. Well done to them; they are a huge part of the community in South Belfast. I want to reflect on those examples of the glorious, diverse community in South Belfast in which people support one another and have a great time together, as you well know, Mr Speaker.

Newtownards Sorting Office

Miss McIlveen: For a number of months, residents served by the Newtownards sorting office have been suffering lengthy delays of several weeks in receiving their mail. There are residents who are missing important medical appointments and running out of vital medication. At the early stage of that, we were being told that there were staff shortages due to sickness. The problems continue, and I have contacted Royal Mail asking for a meeting to find out what steps it is taking to reach a solution, but I have heard nothing, unless, of course, it is using the post to give a response. I have raised the matter with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Labour Markets) highlighting the problems that local people face.

That is not the type of service that we expect from Royal Mail. It is not the service that people are paying for at a rapidly increasing price. Local residents appreciate that it is not the fault of the local postman, but, in the absence of any other explanation, there seems to be considerable foot-dragging on the part of Royal Mail in sorting it out.

My office receives at least four or five calls a day from across the area served by the Newtownards sorting office from people who are deeply concerned at the lack of service. Residents were told that they should collect their mail from the Jubilee Road depot. One gentleman, when he attended, was told that his mail was out for delivery, yet he did not receive it for another three days. Another lady from Cloughey was told last Thursday that hers was to be delivered the next day, and it still has not arrived. One gentleman told me that he had been paid a tax rebate and a week later received the letter telling him that he was getting it. Another gentleman from Killinchy is unable to leave his home, so he could not go to the depot and was without mail for over two weeks until late last week, when a huge bundle of mail was dropped through his letter box.

10.45 am

The stories are the same in towns right across the area, be that the peninsula, Newtownards, Comber, Killinchy and so on. It is not just an issue of inconvenience to those residents; there is a knock-on effect on services and businesses. For example, if National Health Service appointments are missed, that has implications for the health service. That has happened multiple times during the period of postal delays. It is unacceptable. It is also unacceptable that Royal Mail should bury its head in the sand and not meet local representatives on the issue. Instead, we have

a situation where the rumour mill starts to run wild with all sorts of speculation, which is fuelled by customer frustration.

Friends of Ward 15

Mrs Mason: I extend my heartfelt congratulations to the Friends of Ward 15 on celebrating its 50th anniversary last weekend and a special thank you to Jim Mageean and Colum Polly and all the volunteers who organised and made the event marking the occasion at the Great Hall so memorable. It truly was an honour to be part of such a significant milestone, surrounded by the people who have made the organisation what it is today.

Hearing the many stories of how ward 15 has supported not only those facing addiction but their families was moving and inspiring. For those who do not know, Friends of Ward 15 is a vital support group in the Downshire Hospital in Downpatrick, which has given hope to thousands of patients with addictions. It was first created by ex-patients of ward 15 some 50 years ago in 1974. Since then, it has provided essential support and comfort to anyone who is experiencing addiction rehabilitation.

One quote that was shared on the night that really touched me and has stayed with me was:

"You can't go under it. You can't go over it. You must go through it."

That resonates so deeply with the journey of recovery. It is one that requires immense courage, patience and perseverance from the individuals and their loved ones.

Fifty years of service, care and unwavering support for individuals in recovery, as well as their families, is an extraordinary achievement. The compassion, understanding and dedication of everyone involved, past and present, have helped countless people to rebuild their lives and relationships, offering hope and healing to entire families.

Thank you again to everyone who made the event so remarkable. Your tireless work and commitment to this vital cause are truly making a difference. I look forward to seeing how ward 15 will continue to lead the way in supporting recovery and strengthening families over the next 50 years.

On the night, each guest who was in attendance received a little memento, and it says:

"May you be proud of the work you do, the person you are and the difference you make."

That is something that, at times, we all need to hear. Here's to many more years of friendship, healing and community.

ADHD: Services and Support

Mr McReynolds: I rise today to speak on a topic that I have raised several times in the Chamber, and that is attention deficit hyperactivity disorder — ADHD — and the colossal gap in services that exists for children and adults across Northern Ireland. Last week, I was grateful to the Health Minister for meeting ADD-NI, which is a charity that has really led the charge on the topic over the past 27 years. On that note, I will single out Sarah Salters and Keith Anderson and thank them for the work that they have done over the past number of years in highlighting the unfair and needless challenges facing people living with and, crucially, potentially living with ADHD across Northern Ireland.

Those challenges include being told that you are on a waiting list for eight to 10 years for an ADHD assessment, and, in the meantime, there is nothing available; being told that the private diagnosis that you paid over £1,000 for will not be accepted by your GP, but you can pay hundreds of pounds a month instead privately or join a waiting list because there is nothing available; or, lastly, being told that, because your child with that childhood diagnosis who had access to medication has reached the age of 18 and is now an adult, they will need a renewed diagnosis and there will be a gap in service due to fragmented care pathways. That is before we reach the daily symptoms of the condition and the impact that it has on that individual.

Two to three generations of children have now grown up to be adults with ADHD. In that time, they have masked their symptoms and soldiered on into adulthood thinking that they were the problem when it was the lack of services and support that was failing them and, potentially, their parents due to the genetic link that exists in ADHD.

I have recently been appointed as chair of the all-party group on ADHD. We are reinvigorated to do that and do what we can as a group to make sure that those living with the condition get the support and services that they deserve. Last week, we had our first meeting with the Health Minister and welcomed what he told us.

That work appears to be taking place, and we recognise that it will take time that we simply do not have to correct the issues and challenges that people living and potentially living with it face.

As a group and as an ADHD community, we will continue to watch, engage and listen, but, crucially, we will not let it slip off the radar again. Those living with ADHD have suffered in silence for too long. I will do all that I can to make sure that we get the commissioned services and the improvements that we need to make living with the condition easier.

2024 Irish Open Golf Tournament

Ms Forsythe: This week, in South Down, we are honoured and excited to welcome the Irish Open golf tournament to Newcastle. The Royal County Down Golf Club in Newcastle has the honour of hosting the Irish Open. The club was rated by 'Golf Digest' as the world's number-one course, and, just months ago, Northern Ireland was named the best golf destination in western Europe by the International Association of Golf Tour Operators. What better place to host the tournament than South Down, with the unrivalled backdrop

"where the Mountains o' Mourne sweep down to the sea"?

Some 80,000 fans are expected to descend on Newcastle for the event, with a potential global television audience of 400 million homes. The last time the club hosted the event, nine years ago, it was estimated that spectators and participants contributed £4.4million to the local economy, with 30% of visitors travelling from outside Northern Ireland.

There is great excitement throughout Newcastle and the Mournes with a memorable experience on offer to see some of the golfing world's most popular stars in action, including our home-grown favourites: Rory McIlroy, Tom McKibbin, Pdraig Harrington, Shane Lowry and Séamus Power. It will be a huge event in Newcastle. I really welcome it and all that it brings to showcase our area and inspire the next generation of golfers. I wish the Royal County Down Golf Club every success in hosting the event and wish all competitors and spectators an enjoyable tournament.

Federation of Small Businesses and Parkrun: Anniversaries

Ms Nicholl: The Federation of Small Businesses was established 50 years ago next month at a time when the UK economy was on its knees. The Government tried to plug the gaping hole in their finances by hiking National Insurance contributions on the self-employed. It was a blow against those unable to defend themselves.

One man decided to take a stand, and, in that pre-social-media age, he took his pen and wrote a letter to the newspaper calling for business owners as diverse as

"a musician, a boat builder, an undertaker, a chimney sweep, a window cleaner, and hundreds of shopkeepers"

to

"DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT".

Within two weeks of writing his letter, Norman Small had called a public meeting of business owners, and so the National Federation of Self Employed was formed. It is an organisation of volunteers who strive to protect small businesses by lobbying to improve the laws that affect them, as well as providing support and advice services where challenges remain.

Fifty years on, as the largest business lobby in Northern Ireland and, indeed, the UK — many Members will be familiar with Roger Pollen, Neil Hutcheson, Hannah Marshall and John Moore, who have been especially helpful in relation to childcare policy — it is marking the anniversary with a number of activities. One of those will see it engage with another outstanding voluntary organisation that is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, the Parkrun. It is a simple idea, with a 5K run held weekly on Saturday mornings for young and old alike — walkers, Couch to 5K, amateur runners and elite athletes. Because much of the focus of FSB's lobbying efforts is at Stormont, they will engage with the Stormont Parkrun in a small celebration of the power and value of voluntary effort. They are inviting Members, staff, families and supporters to come along to the Stormont Parkrun on Saturday 14 September at 9 am to run, volunteer or just experience that atmosphere and share a tea or coffee with some of those who helped to make both of those great organisations what they are today.

I congratulate FSB and Parkrun on their anniversaries and wish them many more successful years to come.

World Suicide Prevention Day

Mr Brooks: Today, we mark World Suicide Prevention Day. It is a subject on which we can unite, as it is a tragic reality that strikes many of our communities. There will be few inside or outside the Chamber who have not experienced its tragic impact in some way — a friend, a colleague, a family member or someone you know through other channels.

We all agree that it is essential that we foster a culture of openness and support, breaking down the stigma that often surrounds mental health struggles. We must work to make our aspirations of investment in mental health services and of treating mental health equally to physical health a reality, promoting early intervention and ensuring that everyone knows that they are not alone and that there is always another, better way. Every conversation that we have, every sign of encouragement, every show of support can make a difference to someone. Let us commit to making the places where we are present somewhere people can feel heard and listened to.

It would be remiss of me to stand here to mark the day without paying tribute to the work of some of our local mental health charities, such as Aware and Action Mental Health, and national charities such as Samaritans, as well as groups that do terrific work in my constituency of East Belfast, such as Survivors of Suicide and Men's Minds Matter. They do excellent work.

Together, through compassion and understanding, we can work towards a future where everyone in Northern Ireland has the support that they need not only to survive but to thrive.

World Suicide Prevention Day

Mr Durkan: I also stand to mark World Suicide Prevention Day and to express solidarity with all the families and communities scarred by the scourge of suicide. It has been 13 years — it is hard to believe that it has been that long — since the suicide of my beautiful sister Gay. My family still bears the scars — I will never forget the kindness that you showed me at that time, Mr Speaker — and those scars never heal. So many families — too many families — have similar stories and share similar pain. They, like us, still lie awake at night, torturing themselves trying to answer questions that they will never be able to answer. It is not something that you ever get over; it is just something that you go through.

I commend the courage of so many suffering families who channel their grief into helping others to navigate the minefield of loss through suicide. I mention in particular the family of young Jack Edgar, who was lost to suicide in December 2022. Today, his father, Tony, and other family and friends will finish the last leg of a huge run from Derry to the Aviva stadium in Dublin, where Ireland play Greece tonight, to raise awareness and help shatter the stigma of suicide. Their courage and commitment to that cause is not just a fitting tribute to their beautiful son: it will help to promote awareness, provoke conversations and even save lives.

I commend the work of so many of our charities, and I implore this place, as an Assembly, and the Executive to do more. We can all do more. The Department of Health can do more, the Executive should do more, but we all, as elected representatives, have a duty to do what we can to promote awareness of the issue, to challenge stigma and to work together to promote good mental health and well-being.

Childhood Cancer Awareness Month

Mrs Erskine: This month is, obviously, September, but it is also Childhood Cancer Awareness Month, which is an international campaign to support and raise awareness of children and young people who live with cancer. The badge that I wear today marks that month.

We can all agree that cancer is a cruel illness that snatches loved ones away from us and, as the Princess of Wales said yesterday, can change life in an instant. It also gives you a new perspective on life. It is a tough journey for those receiving treatment, and, for children and young people, there are extra pressures, such as time away from their social circles, endless trips to the hospital, time out of school and, for many young people, feeling different from their peers. As we all know, it can be tough at that age.

I have had personal experience of childhood cancer in my family.

I remember my sister travelling at 6.00 am with my parents to Belfast for hospital appointments. There was huge pressure on my parents. Being a child should be carefree, but it is not the case if parents have a child with cancer.

11.00 am

The health and well-being of children, young people and families is just as important as medical treatment. That is why, today, I publicly

thank the charities that supported my family: CLIC Sargent Cancer Care for Children and the Cancer Fund for Children that runs Daisy Lodge in Newcastle.

Those charities supported my family during very difficult times. In Daisy Lodge, we had a haven to which we knew that we could go on holiday without the fear of not having anybody who would know what to do if we had a medical emergency, and those who were there knew exactly what we were going through as a family. I pay tribute to our healthcare staff, in particular play therapists, who helped us understand cancer through the lens of play.

Children are the future of our society. We often talk about ensuring that children have the best possible start in life, and that is so true when we talk about children who have been struck by an illness. We need to ensure that we fund services appropriately and must take into account that it is not just about tackling the disease but about the educational, social, mental health and family support needs.

Ministerial Statement

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Communities that he wishes to make a statement.

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities): I wish to make a statement on the future provision of winter fuel payments in Northern Ireland. Although I already provided a written ministerial statement to the Assembly on 30 August, I am making an oral statement to the Assembly today in order to give the House an opportunity to express its views and for Members to ask questions on behalf of their constituents, many of whom will be deeply impacted on by the Labour Government's decision to limit winter fuel payments.

Let me be clear: the restriction on those payments is directly and wholly the result of a decision taken by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The winter fuel payment was introduced by a Labour Government in 1997, and successive Governments, recognising its critical importance to pensioners, have kept it in place, until now. This was a totally unexpected announcement from the new Government in Westminster. It was not mooted by them before now. It was not part of the Labour Party's manifesto, and, indeed, only a few months ago, when the Prime Minister was the Leader of the Opposition, he said that the winter fuel payment should be maintained. It therefore came as a surprise to us all that the Government would announce the removal of that important benefit, and I can confirm that my Department was given no prior notice of the planned change.

As Members will be aware, the principle of parity is reflected in section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and it generally means that social security benefits are paid at the same rates and with the same conditions of entitlement across the UK. Where parity is maintained, expenditure on pensions and social security benefits in Northern Ireland is funded, in full, by the UK Government. Any deviation from the principle of parity that results in additional expenditure in Northern Ireland must normally be paid from the block grant.

The estimated additional cost to the block grant of maintaining universal entitlement to a winter fuel payment in Northern Ireland for winter 2024-25 is £44.3 million, and that does not even include any additional delivery or staffing costs. Moreover, it is estimated that an appropriate IT system to deliver universal winter

fuel payments in Northern Ireland could cost between £5 million and £8 million for development and a further 20% of the development spend per annum for support and maintenance.

For the Executive even to consider breaking parity with the decision by the Labour Government, it will require significant cuts to Northern Ireland's already struggling public services. To those who glibly say that the Executive could make a different decision, I ask them this: what would they cut or what services would they postpone? It is simply not credible to claim that the Government have left the Executive with any other choice. Let me repeat what I have said a number of times since the Chancellor's announcement: I strongly disagree with and am totally opposed to this decision. It is wrong because it will have serious consequences for the comfort, well-being and health of older people across Northern Ireland; it is wrong because the health implications will put additional pressure on public services, which will face increased burdens; and it is wrong because, in removing benefits from those who do not need them, those who are just above the threshold become collateral damage.

I have made clear to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions my total opposition to this decision, and I have outlined the detrimental impact that it will have on many people in Northern Ireland. I have raised this issue with other Ministers in the UK Government, and, as an Executive, we have written to the Prime Minister to express our grave concern.

Even at this late stage, I urge the Government to reconsider. We are all aware of the incredibly difficult Budget situation that we find ourselves in. We have had to make choices in our Departments that, ordinarily, we would not like to make, but this decision is wrong, and I hope that the Government will recognise that.

In the meantime, it is extremely important that people ensure that they are receiving all the benefits that they are entitled to. I therefore encourage everyone to check their entitlement to pension credit at their earliest opportunity. That can be done by telephoning the Northern Ireland Pension Centre's pension credit application line. The Department's unique Make the Call wrap-around service puts people in touch with any benefits, supports and services to which they may be entitled, and I also encourage people to get in touch with it.

This is a worrying time for many who are concerned about how they will manage this

winter. The Government have got this wrong, and additional support will be required. I have already asked Executive colleagues that any Barnett consequential for cost-of-living support this winter be ring-fenced so that we can do whatever we can to ameliorate the worst consequences of this harmful UK Government decision. I will keep the Assembly informed about how we can best help in that regard.

I commend the statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Minister. Before I call Members, you can see yourselves, Members, that everybody wants to ask a question, so I ask you all to be as concise as possible. I call Mark Durkan on behalf of the Opposition.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for his statement. It is appropriate that he has come to the House to make an oral statement on this issue. We share the Minister's opposition to and anger at a decision of the UK Government that will plunge thousands of pensioners further into poverty.

We in the SDLP recognise the constraints of parity, but parity does not mean "parrottry". Will the Minister tell us what, if any, alternatives have been explored and whether his Department will look at implementing income threshold criteria rather than basing eligibility solely on benefit entitlement?

Mr Lyons: When it comes to this decision, we face a number of problems in trying to take a different path from that set by the UK Government. Some have said that this is a devolved issue and that it is therefore entirely up to us to decide what we do, but the principle of parity is ingrained not just in the funding that is available but in the methods of delivery for us to make sure that we get money to those who need it.

We were in a position where we were not only struggling halfway through a financial year to find significant additional resource but we did not have the necessary IT systems to deliver the benefit that we might like to deliver or to find another way of means-testing the benefit. The delivery of a new IT system would take 18 to 36 months to complete, and it would come at additional cost. We were not able to use the existing DWP system, and, if we were to do it manually, it would require 150,000 man-hours of work by my officials, which we simply could not do. So, although people are saying that this was a decision for the Executive, in reality, it was a decision for the Executive in name only, in that we have neither the funding nor the

mechanism to continue this. That is why it is right that we continue to pressure the UK Government to ensure that additional support can be made available or, preferably, to reverse this decision.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for his statement. I also agree that this is a wrong decision.

The recent announcement by the British Government on the winter fuel payment cut will impact on people who do not qualify for pension credit but may, nonetheless, struggle to pay their fuel bills. You mentioned amelioration: have you explored ways to ameliorate that impact should the necessary funding be available?

Mr Lyons: There is the potential for different funds to be made available to the Northern Ireland Executive. For example, an extension to the household support fund was announced by the Government last week. I have said to my Executive colleagues that I would like that money to be ring-fenced so that we can, where possible, provide a top-up. That is not something that we will be able to do in the next few weeks, because of the way in which the IT systems are set up. If there is the potential to do that, it will happen later. However, yes, it is absolutely right that if additional support is available, we need to ensure that it goes to those who need it.

Ms Brownlee: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. We all know that this is an absolutely shocking decision. My granda wanted me to pass that on. The Minister referenced the significantly low take-up of pension credit and ways to check entitlement to it, but we all are aware of the lack of knowledge on, and the stigma associated with, claiming benefits. Minister, what can your Department do to address that, and how can you work with the likes of local government to coordinate services to help support people who are in that position?

Mr Lyons: The Member is absolutely right to raise the issue of awareness of benefits. I say it time and time again in the House, but I hope that Members take on board what I say and make use of the excellent Make the Call service. Through that service, we have been able to deliver millions of pounds of additional support to people across Northern Ireland. There should be absolutely no shame in claiming the support that has been made available to people, so I encourage people to make use of that service and the pension credit application line that I have talked about. I also

encourage people to go to their MLAs, and if Members need any further advice on how they can help their constituents, I am more than happy to provide that.

Ms Mulholland: Thank you, Minister: I really appreciate you outlining your lack of knowledge and forewarning of the cut, unlike others who sit on the same Government Benches as those who are driving the change in Westminster and then criticise the change at the Assembly. We want to see solutions. We want to see things that will make a tangible difference, and we want to understand what wider, targeted support measures for older people there are going to be, particularly in the absence of — I know that I harp on about this —

Mr Speaker: Question, please.

Ms Mulholland: — an anti-poverty strategy. When can we expect an anti-poverty strategy, and will there be anything targeted at older people in it?

Mr Lyons: I know that there has been some commentary on that over the past couple of days, but the Executive are united and committed to ensuring that an anti-poverty strategy is delivered, along with a fuel poverty strategy. Of course, there will be measures within that that will target poverty across all age groups. However, it is fair to say that fuel poverty is a particular issue for older people, and that is certainly where my focus will be. In the extensive conversations that I have had, back and forward, with Executive colleagues over the decision, it is clear that there is Executive support for ensuring that the fuel poverty strategy is delivered as soon as possible.

Mr Allen: The Minister, like so many others, will no doubt recall the memorable moment when former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak gave his resignation statement with the sound of 'Things Can Only Get Better' blaring in the background. Many held this Government up as being the better option. Clearly, that has not transpired to be the case for the many pensioners who have had this valuable payment that they rely on abruptly taken away from them. What engagement has the Minister had with the UK Government on increasing the minimum income threshold for pension credit?

Mr Lyons: Unfortunately, I did not have any prior knowledge of this whatsoever, but, as the Member said, I have raised those issues in subsequent meetings that I have had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and

other UK Government Ministers. I do not think that this is a decision that is right for older people in Northern Ireland, but I do not think that it is the right one for the UK Government either. It is delivering short-term savings that will create longer-term problems for them. It is inevitable that there will have to be a change made in relation to this, which may do away with all the savings that the Government hope to make. I will certainly continue to push the issues that the Member has raised.

Ms Ferguson: Given the high levels of fuel poverty that people and families across the North continue to experience and the devastating news for pensioners that we are speaking about today, will the Minister confirm the additional actions that he will take to ensure that our pensioners are aware of and able to access their full entitlements? Will he confirm that the detrimental impact that we are talking about today will be reflected in the draft fuel poverty strategy, which is due out for consultation shortly?

11.15 am

Mr Lyons: There are a number of issues there. First, as I said, we need to make sure that the Make the Call service is well known and that people take advantage of it. However, I have also engaged directly with the Government to ensure that Northern Ireland is included in any campaigns that they are running to make sure that people are aware of the support that is available to them, that we are not left behind and that the work that they are doing in the meantime to mitigate the worst impacts of the decision is also reflected in what they are doing in the rest of the UK. This is a significant issue for the fuel poverty strategy, and it will have a significant impact. Therefore, it is right that it is addressed in the fuel poverty strategy as well.

Mr Buckley: Minister, this is a disgraceful decision, with Labour choosing to pick the pocket of over 10 million pensioners across the UK whilst there is continual wastage on benefit fraud to the tune of £2 billion and, indeed, a cash-busting £11 billion on climate-related foreign aid. Transparency is important. The SDLP, which sits as the Opposition in this place and enjoys a sister party relationship with Labour, sits on the Government Benches at Westminster. Will the Minister clarify whether he has received any letter or appeal from the leader of the Opposition, Mr Matthew O'Toole, challenging this disgraceful decision by the Labour Government?

Mr Lyons: I have had no correspondence from Mr O'Toole on the matter. I note that he had time to speak to the media about it, but he certainly did not write to me or encourage me to take any course of action. Maybe he will contact the Labour Party directly, given the good relationship that they have through sharing the Government Benches.

Ms Armstrong: Like you, Minister, I am totally opposed to Westminster's decision, and I encourage you to continue to make representations for support for vulnerable people, particularly older people, who are living in poverty. We are thinking about solutions, so can you confirm that you will include targeted and clear actions in your upcoming housing strategy that will deliver affordable warmth for pensioners who do not qualify for pension credit and, therefore, will not receive the winter fuel payment?

If I may, and if your diary permits, I invite you to Room 115 at 1.00 pm to meet Electrical Safety First to discuss with organisations the pressures that face the most vulnerable, including pensioners.

Mr Lyons: First, I appreciate the invite, but, unfortunately, I have other business this afternoon. Even at this late stage, however, I appreciate the invitation to the event, and I hope that the Member will keep me updated about what is discussed at that meeting.

There are a number of ways in which we can provide additional help on those issues through what we hope to do in housing and the fuel poverty strategy and the anti-poverty strategy more generally. Again, tackling those issues will not just be the responsibility of any one Department. Although I hope that the Government will reverse their decision and provide additional support, it is only right that we continue to do what we can to make sure that we limit the impact of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

Ms Á Murphy: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber this morning. Rural homes are often more expensive to heat due to poor insulation and a higher dependence on fossil fuels. Minister, will you look at a specific range of measures to help pensioners who live in rural areas to heat their homes?

Mr Lyons: The energy strategy will look at that in order to make sure that people have access to the right information so that they can get what they need to make sure that their homes are as energy-efficient as possible. However,

we might be able to provide other supports. As I just said, it is so important that Ministers and Departments work together so that we can look at the root causes of some of those problems. Fuel poverty is so much higher in Northern Ireland because of some of the issues that the Member raised. We need to tackle the root causes of that, but, unfortunately, the Labour Government's decision has just added to what is an already very difficult decision.

Mr Harvey: Minister, what advice can you give to constituents of mine who now face many months of financial uncertainty coming into the winter?

Mr Lyons: I am glad that we have had that question because it allows me to speak again about the importance of making sure that people are getting what they are entitled to. I may have mentioned it, but there is the fantastic Make the Call service in my Department. I encourage MLAs to make sure that people are getting what they require.

For those in social housing, it is important that the Housing Executive and housing associations do what they can to help. If there are issues around that, I encourage the Member to contact me directly. Again, I would still encourage people to lobby the Government on this and get them to change their mind, because this was the wrong decision and it is simply not tenable for them to continue in this vein.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for his remarks so far. Minister, in your modelling within the Department, have you worked out the number of people likely to be affected by this, and, with the impact of the particular fuel strategies that we have coming forward, how we are going to deal with that issue?

Mr Lyons: There are 306,000 pensioners in Northern Ireland. We believe that 249,000 will lose out and only 57,000 will retain their winter fuel payments. Anyone saying that this is about taking away a benefit from the richest in our society has got that wrong. Over 80% of those currently entitled to a winter fuel payment will lose it. Inevitably, that means that those on the edges and fringes will be deeply affected by this decision.

Mr McHugh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. *[Translation: Thank you, Minister, for your statement.]* You outlined the intervention, via the Executive, that expressed great concern regarding this announcement. What responses

were received from that engagement and from other correspondence that you might have had?

Mr Lyons: I assume that the Member is referring to ministerial colleagues in Northern Ireland. Obviously, this was going to be a cross-cutting, controversial and significant decision, so it needed to be referred to the Executive. All Executive colleagues were in agreement on the need for this decision to be taken, albeit we all did it reluctantly. However, when we considered the inability of the Executive to fund this, and the inability of the Executive to deliver it through the current system, it was, perhaps, inevitable that all Ministers in the Executive came to the same decision.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister for his statement. Like others, I share my anger at the Labour decision. What engagement did the Minister receive from the Labour Government in advance of their decision?

Mr Lyons: I had no engagement with or warning from the Government until the day of the announcement itself. That is unusual because, when changes are made to social security benefits or payments, we would normally get advance notice so that we could prepare and change the legislation. In this instance, however, we received no advance notification.

Mr McMurray: Is there a specific communications plan that the Minister's Department is going to roll out with regard to the winter fuel payment?

Mr Lyons: As I said, I have engaged with DWP and asked that Northern Ireland is included in any further communications plan. We have a communications plan with regard to the help and support that we give. Clearly, that will need to be ramped up over the coming weeks to make sure that those who are eligible for pension credit but not getting it apply.

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber on this issue. It is incredible that, in 2024, charities and organisations such as Libraries NI have warm-room initiatives. They say that elderly people are attending their services just to escape the cold. This is a cross-departmental issue, as has been said. There is an impact on health, with pensioners switching off their heating. Unfortunately, there is a narrative that the Executive reached this decision very easily, so can the Minister assure us that, before taking this decision, the Executive gave proper and due consideration to

the extra pressures that would be placed on public services?

Mr Lyons: The Member is absolutely right to highlight the fact that, in recent winters, a considerable number of people have availed themselves of services provided, such as warm places to go to. That was all part of our consideration. We recognised what a difficult decision this would be, and the Member is absolutely right to highlight the fact that it was not a decision that was taken lightly. There was extensive engagement with Executive colleagues. I know that there has been some criticism simply because we did not meet in person, but the fact that we did not meet in person does not mean that this was not considered, that we did not look at all the evidence or that we did not properly consider what the implications would be. Unfortunately, this was an Executive decision in name only, because the Government did not provide us with the finances or the means to deliver the benefit as it currently exists.

Ms Forsythe: I thank the Minister for bringing this issue to the Chamber today. It is good to hear him speak so strongly in opposition to the decision by the Labour Government. What engagement has the Minister had with the Labour Government since their decision to limit the winter fuel payment?

Mr Lyons: I have had a number of meetings with Ministers in the UK Government. First of all, I expressed my concern directly to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Liz Kendall. I have also spoken to other Ministers in the Northern Ireland Office and in DWP. Of course, the Executive have written to the Prime Minister, on behalf of all Executive colleagues, to highlight our opposition to this.

Mr Gaston: Minister, you have thrown down the gauntlet to MLAs today to identify what we would cut or what services we should postpone. Stormont is able to find £9 million annually for an Irish language Act, £1.6 million annually to maintain prison buildings at the Maze as a shrine to terrorists and over £35 million a year on useless North/South bodies and the North/South Ministerial Council. Those are cuts that I would happily make to ease the burden on our most vulnerable. Did the Minister or any of his Executive colleagues press for those revenue spends to be cut in order to cover the cost of maintaining the winter fuel payment?

Mr Lyons: The Member has highlighted not just resource spend but some capital spend. Even if we wanted to end all the services that some of

those bodies provide, which include promoting Northern Ireland across the world, for example, and we were to cut all those, some of that would actually cost more money because you would be wanting to get rid of staff in year through compulsory redundancies. I am more than happy to listen to any Members outline their ideas about how we can save money in Northern Ireland, but a lot of what the Member talks about is staff-heavy and would require compulsory redundancies, which might actually cost more money in the short term.

I hope that the Member listened to what I said, because this is not just an issue of affordability, although that is an important part — it is an issue of deliverability. How do we ensure that the payments get to those who need them, given that we do not have access to the current IT system and a new IT system would take 18 to 36 months to develop, unless the Member is suggesting that I find 150,000 man-hours in the Civil Service in order to manually process all those benefits? If we are trying to pretend that this is simple and straightforward, that is simply wrong.

Mr Chambers: Minister, what engagement have you had with community and voluntary organisations and other interested stakeholders to support the Department in tackling fuel poverty? Do you feel that you could utilise their experience and knowledge, through a vehicle such as a fuel poverty task force, to help tackle fuel poverty?

Mr Lyons: The Member raises an important issue. There certainly has been engagement on fuel poverty and about what comes next, and that engagement is important, as is listening to people. Unfortunately, that is not what this UK Government have done, or if they have done it, they certainly have not shared any of that with us. It is concerning to me that, even though we are about to have a vote in the House of Commons this evening and the House of Lords tomorrow, the Government have still not released their impact assessment, so we do not actually know what the Government believe the impact will be on people right across the UK.

If they had done what the Member suggested and had listened to those organisations, we might be in a better place.

11.30 am

Mr Carroll: Minister, there is a lot of hand-wringing this morning, but you and your Executive colleagues are complicit in the decision. You made the decision to cut winter

fuel payments. There was no gun to your head. You could have said no, but you buckled shamefully. What assessment have you and your Department made of the excess deaths that will definitely come this winter as a result of that brutal decision?

Mr Lyons: There you go. That just shows that Mr Carroll does not listen to anything that is said. I have set out two issues: affordability and deliverability. If the Member would like to come forward with his suggestions about how he would have found the money in-year, I would be more than happy to hear them. If he wants to give me his ideas about how he would deliver the benefits without an existing IT system or the ability to procure a new one in time, I would love to hear them. How does he expect to do it? He is pontificating, as normal —.

Mr Carroll: Your name is on the statement.

Mr Lyons: He is pontificating, as normal, but he has no answers. He likes to stand and shout from the sidelines, but he has absolutely no solutions and nothing to offer.

My concern is for those who find themselves in the position where they will not be able to heat their homes this winter. That is why we are doing everything that we can to make sure that those who are entitled to support get it and to put the pressure on the Government. The Member has given us no answers to the queries that I have raised, because there are no answers. There is no simple, straightforward possible way for us to do that. He is just showing his political immaturity.

Mr Mathison: I thank the Minister for his statement. I join my colleagues in confirming my opposition to the policy change.

Will the Minister consider releasing any resources or additional support to the independent advice sector, which already stands in the gap and provides a lot of assistance to people experiencing severe financial hardship at this time? The sector is likely to see a huge uptake of its services over the months ahead.

Mr Lyons: The Member is right to highlight that point. We will get additional people coming forward to look for help not just from government support but from some of the independent advice services.

The Member will be aware of the budgetary constraints in my Department. Of course, we will look at all the bids that come in and the

support that may be requested on the basis of need. Again, I encourage people to make sure that they take up the support and advice where it is offered.

Mr McNulty: Minister, it is sad to see that your Department and your Executive colleagues have raised the white flag of surrender on winter fuel payments. It is also ludicrous that some of your colleagues point the finger at the Opposition. Will you confirm that you did, in fact, receive a letter from the Opposition on this important issue and let us know whether your Department has any idea how many pensioners are entitled to pension credit but are not receiving it?

Mr Lyons: First, I confirm that I have received no letter from the leader of the Opposition on the issue. Secondly, the Member raises the issue of the number of people on pension credit. I do not have the updated figures on that, but the most recent estimate is from 2022, when it was estimated that 26,300 people were entitled to pension credit but were not getting it.

Let me go back to the Member's first comment. It is worth repeating that the issues that we faced were around the affordability and deliverability of maintaining the benefit as we currently have it. I have set out the issues around affordability and the issue of deliverability around the IT system. In his question, the Member did not come back with ideas or a solution as to how he would deliver that. Instead, he came off with a pithy response about raising the white flag. If anyone really believes that, if Justin McNulty were in the Executive, there would be a different outcome to this, they are living in cloud cuckoo land.

Mr Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement. Everybody in the House shares his concerns. Does he share my concerns about this short-term cut by a Labour Government who did not have it in their manifesto and told lies to the public?

What will the impact on local services in Northern Ireland be? What will the longer-term outcome from the cuts be?

Mr Lyons: The Member is absolutely right: there was no indication whatever from the UK Government that this was coming. At no stage did they say that they intended to do it. Had they been upfront and honest with the public, there would be a little less anger right now, and perhaps people would have more time to prepare for the consequences.

I share the Member's concerns that the Government seem to be trying to make short-term savings for the Treasury, but what will happen is that there will be a greater impact on public services in Northern Ireland, and we will have to bear the cost. There may be more visits to GPs, more hospitalisations, more people needing care and more people dealing with other illnesses. The decision does not make economic sense either and is not good for people's health. That is why I again urge the Government to reconsider. They have not shared their assessment with us, but Labour did its own assessment in 2017 and said that doing this could cause 4,000 excess deaths. Perhaps the Labour Government should keep that in mind.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I want to say that, if I have missed anybody who wants to speak, please stand. A lot of people stood earlier in the debate. I call Colin McGrath.

Mr McGrath: No one here doubts that this is a terrible decision that will be devastating for pensioners here. It will not be supported by us, here or in Westminster.

Does the Minister agree that the UK's finances are in a mess as a result of 14 years of Tory Government Budgets, which were often shoved through Westminster with the votes of his party enabling them to get through? If you are looking for a solution, Minister, will you consider amending the discretionary support that is available to people, enabling them to avail themselves of it should they find themselves trapped as a result of this decision?

Mr Lyons: Again, we have no answer from the Opposition to the question that I originally asked, which was this: how will we deal with the issues of affordability and deliverability? We have heard nothing at all from them.

Let us just talk a little bit —.

Mr McGrath: Discretionary support: I just said it.

Mr Lyons: Let us talk a little bit about some of the things that we have been able to do at Westminster. The triple lock was secured because of my party's intervention. I wish —.

Mr McGrath: You propped up the Tories. You delivered the cuts.

Mr Lyons: I wish —.

A Member: You sit with them.

Mr Lyons: I wish that it were the case that the Government would retain the winter fuel payment as well, but, thankfully, additional support will come to pensioners across the United Kingdom because of the decisions that we took at Westminster. Unfortunately, it is those with whom the Member's party sits who are cutting the winter fuel payment.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Members. That concludes —. *[Interruption.]* Order, please. Take your seat. Thank you, Members, for your participation and cooperation. We got in every Member who wanted to speak in less than half an hour, which is exceptional. I thank Members for their cooperation in keeping questions concise.

Mr O'Toole: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I will also endeavour to be concise, but I wish to clarify a matter. We have had a bit of political badinage and back-and-forth in the Chamber about the SDLP's role. Unlike the DUP, we have never propped up an austerity Government, and, of course, the Alliance Party's sister party, the Lib Dems, brought in austerity in the first place. May I just —?

Mr Speaker: Mr O'Toole, I am struggling to find a point of order in what you are saying. Please come to it.

Mr O'Toole: My specific point of order, Mr Speaker, is that a misstatement was made about the Opposition. The Minister was asked whether he had received a letter from the Opposition, and he said no, but he has received a letter from the Opposition.

Mr Buckley: He said that he had not received a letter from the leader of the Opposition.

Mr Lyons: Not from the leader of the Opposition.

Mr O'Toole: I do not write every letter on behalf of the Opposition. Does the Minister write every letter on behalf of the DUP? I doubt it. He received a letter from the Opposition about the policy, and he did not respond to it. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: That was not a point of order, but the point has been made. I ask Members to take their ease while we change the Table for the next item of business.

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

Committee Business

Child Support Enforcement Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 13 December 2024, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Child Support Enforcement Bill.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there will be no time limit on the debate. I call the Chairperson, Mr Colm Gildernew, to open the debate on the motion.

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you very much, Principal Deputy Speaker.]* I request Members' support to extend the Committee Stage of the Child Support Enforcement Bill to 13 December 2024. I recognise that it is a short Bill. Nevertheless, it demands the same level of scrutiny as any other Bill, due to the changes that it will bring about in the operation of the child maintenance scheme.

By way of a reminder, Members, given the summer recess, the Bill is aimed at improving the effectiveness of child support services in the North and focuses on three key areas. The first is strengthening enforcement powers. The Bill enhances the enforcement measures available to ensure that non-residential parents meet their child support obligations. That includes powers for the Child Maintenance Service to take stronger actions to collect overdue payments. The second area is improving services. The Bill aims to make the process of managing and collecting child support more efficient and user-friendly. That will involve streamlining procedures and potentially introducing new mechanisms for dealing with non-compliance. The third area is support for families. The Bill includes provision to better support families in managing child support arrangements, ensuring that the system is fair and responsive to the needs of parents and children. Overall, the Bill seeks to ensure that child support is more reliably collected and that families receive the financial support that they are entitled to.

At Second Stage, I highlighted the fact that the Bill will align child support enforcement mechanisms here with those already established in England, Scotland and Wales under the Child Support (Enforcement) Act 2023 and that the Committee had been informed by officials that the alignment would ensure parity and improve the efficiency of the Child Maintenance Service in securing maintenance for qualifying children.

The Committee welcomes the intent behind the proposed changes, and our call for evidence is now live on Citizen Space until 4 October. We have identified a number of stakeholders from whom we wish to take evidence, and we have written directly to organisations that might be affected by the legislation. We very much encourage people to engage with us as we go through the Committee Stage into the autumn term.

I ask the House to agree the extension to provide the Committee with additional time to scrutinise the Bill so that we can do our best to ensure that it is as thorough and considered as possible.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Members are seeking to speak on the Committee motion, so I will put the Question.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 13 December 2024, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Child Support Enforcement Bill.

Private Members' Business

Budgetary Pressures

Mr Tennyson: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its grave concern at the significant budgetary pressures facing the Executive; recognises the severe impact of these pressures on the delivery of, and investment in, public services, including policing and justice, health and social care, education, housing, infrastructure and our environment; notes that these pressures have arisen as a result of a failed policy of austerity at Westminster, financial mismanagement by the previous UK Government and underfunding of Northern Ireland below its level of relative need; agrees that, while the interim fiscal framework agreed with the UK Government was an important first step, the proposed 124% relative need factor does not adequately reflect policing and justice need in Northern Ireland and the disproportionate squeeze on the Justice budget; believes that a baselined fiscal floor set at a level greater than 124% should be delivered without further delay; calls on the Minister of Finance to publish the Executive sustainability plan, including steps to tackle the cost of division in society, which leaves the Executive with hundreds of millions of pounds less to invest in public services each year; and further calls on the UK Government to depart from their austerity policy by reviewing the fiscal rules and pursuing a progressive taxation system.

11.45 am

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

Eóin, please open the debate on the motion.

Mr Tennyson: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker.

Alliance has consistently warned that the Executive have inherited the worst set of financial circumstances in the history of devolution. Prolonged Westminster austerity, the economic damage of Brexit, a global

pandemic, war in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis have each taken enormous tolls on the economy, our public finances and the people whom we are all here to represent. That squeeze has been felt across the devolved Administrations. Just last week, the Scottish Government announced emergency saving measures amounting to £500 million in order to balance their Budget mid-year. Here in Northern Ireland, that pain has been compounded even further by a funding formula that has not kept pace with need and a cycle of stop-start government at the behest of the two largest parties, which has done untold damage to our public services.

The starting point for the debate has to be honesty about the enormity of the challenge that we face. We have some of the worst hospital waiting lists anywhere in western Europe; an under-resourced and overstretched Police Service; creaking waste water infrastructure that is polluting our rivers and Lough Neagh; young people being locked out of housing, and too many parents being forced out of work by crippling childcare costs. However, we cannot simply stop there. Alliance comes to the Chamber not to simply bemoan the problem or decry the challenges that we face but to offer solutions and a credible path forward. Yesterday, the Executive set out a Programme for Government, with plans to tackle those issues and many others and to deliver positive change for everyone in our community. Our ability to deliver on those ambitions will be contingent on a reset of fiscal policy at Westminster, a reformulation of our funding model here in Northern Ireland and serious efforts to deliver financial sustainability and reform locally. I will address each of those issues in turn.

It is no secret that the UK Government hold the bulk of the fiscal levers, and so have the greatest influence on the Budget that is ultimately available to the Executive. When the new Government took office, the Chancellor, Rachel Reeves, rightly diagnosed the problem: a £22 billion black hole in our finances as a result of reckless and unfunded commitments that were made by the Conservatives. We are told that the Government will not repeat the mistakes of the previous one, and yet, in June, the Institute for Fiscal Studies pointed out that Labour's plans mean that public services are likely to be seriously squeezed and face real-terms cuts. The Resolution Foundation has warned that, based on our current spending projections, the Government will need to make £19 billion of annual cuts by 2028-29. However you cut it, that is an extension of the very same

austerity that decimated public services and communities under the Tories.

In 2010, David Cameron told us that we were all in it together. Since then, the superwealthy have amassed greater affluence and wealth, and big oil companies have obtained record profits. Meanwhile, working people in my constituency have been hit hard by a stagnation in living standards, the dismantling of the social security system and spiralling costs, so much so that the wealthiest 1% in society now possess more wealth than the poorest 70%. To be frank, austerity is a political choice, and it is a choice that my constituents can no longer bear.

There is an alternative. The UK Government can, and should, take steps towards a more progressive, fair and redistributive system of taxation to end the indignity whereby some of the wealthiest in our society pay a lower overall rate of tax than working people who are struggling to make ends meet. They could, for example, explore a wealth tax or seek to simplify and align capital gains tax more closely with income, as recommended by the Office of Tax Simplification. The Government could also seek to further extend and expand the windfall tax so that energy companies that profit from pollution and rising costs on our constituents pay their fair share.

Fiscal discipline is absolutely essential. There is no question about that. However, self-imposing the fiscal rules of one of the most undisciplined Governments is no way to achieve that. Reforming the fiscal rules to adopt a more long-term approach to investment in order to recognise the indirect costs of environmental inaction is a realistic and credible option to generate additional headroom and unlock additional investment in public services.

For so many reasons, it costs more to deliver public services in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK. Relatively, we have a larger public sector, greater sparsity of population and a greater number of dependants, to name a few factors. However, for many years, the argument that Northern Ireland was underfunded was dismissed. Well, no longer. The concession of the previous Government that we were the only part of the UK that was funded below relative need is significant progress. However, the needs factor that has subsequently been introduced is not a fiscal floor but a fiscal ceiling and does not adequately address that shortfall, nor does the Alliance Party believe that the 124% proffered actually captures our relative need.

Yesterday, we had a debate about the under-resourcing of policing and justice, which is also at the centre of the debate about our funding formula. Although we know that policing a divided society is enormously complicated and costly, the period over which average policing and justice spend was assessed relative to England dramatically underestimated objective need and focused on a period during which the Budget was squeezed for political reasons and spending was obscured by COVID-19. It is our view that the period during which policing and justice ought to be assessed is the ring-fenced period between 2010 and 2015, which actually offers a more reliable reflection of the UK Government's revealed funding preference. That would lift overall relative need to at least 127%, and, by incorporating taxable capacity and benefit-rate sensitivity, there are strong arguments that that should be even higher.

In making the case to the UK Government, however, we cannot shirk our responsibilities. That is why we are also calling in the motion on the Finance Minister to publish the promised sustainability plan, setting out the case not only for a revised fiscal framework but for transformation here at home. Failure to adequately grasp the nettle on transformation has in part walked us to this position. Eight long years after the Bengoa review of our health service was published, we now finally need to see a proper action plan for the transformation and reconfiguration of our services. It is also difficult to make the case to Treasury about our dire financial position while, when some Departments can barely meet the cost of essentials, others are making discretionary spending decisions, such as that of the Education Minister to spend £250,000 on magnetic wallets when, the last time that I checked, phones can be switched off and stored for free. How many police officers could that expenditure have funded? How many nurses?

So, too, must we finally confront the elephant in the room that is the cost of delivering services in a divided society. Estimates place that cost anywhere between £400 million and £800 million every year, and the refusal of some Ministers to even acknowledge the existence of that cost is not tenable and must change. We will, therefore, not support the DUP amendment, which removes from the motion the very words "cost of division".

It will be no surprise to anyone in the Chamber to hear me say again that you cannot achieve sustainable finances without sustainable political institutions. Reform of this place to remove the ability of any single party to block

government, or, more importantly, to block progress in government, is essential if we are to make the change that is needed to our public services and stabilise our finances.

There is no doubt that the challenges are enormous. They are not, however, insurmountable. With a new Executive in place and a new Government at Westminster, there is a renewed opportunity for change, and, for our part, we in Alliance will not shirk our responsibilities in leading that change.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Robbie Butler to move amendment No 1.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. This will not take long.

Amendment No 1 not moved.

Ms Forsythe: I beg to move amendment No 2:

Leave out all after the first "relative need;" and insert:

"agrees that, while the interim fiscal framework agreed with the UK Government was an important first step, the proposed 124% relative need factor will, as things stand, only apply to future Barnett consequentials and cannot remedy the damage caused by core funding for Northern Ireland dropping below need, prior to the restoration of devolution in February 2024; stresses that this will have a significant, adverse and recurrent impact on the scale of the Northern Ireland block grant and therefore the delivery of vital front-line services; further notes that the proposed 124% relative need factor does not adequately reflect policing and justice need in Northern Ireland and the disproportionate squeeze on the Justice budget; believes that a baselined fiscal floor, set at a level greater than 124%, should be delivered without further delay; calls on the Minister of Finance to publish the Executive sustainability plan, including steps to tackle inefficiencies and duplication, which leaves the Executive with less to invest in public services each year; and further calls on the UK Government to depart from their austerity policy by agreeing a new, long-term financial settlement with the Executive, reviewing the fiscal rules and pursuing a progressive taxation system."

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Diane. You will have 10 minutes to propose amendment No 2 and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five

minutes. Please open the debate on amendment No 2.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. We are all well versed on the current budgetary pressures in Northern Ireland. I welcome Members tabling the motion to keep our finances front and centre of discussions in the Assembly, as the finances available define the parameters of what we and the Executive are able to do. The huge pressures facing departmental budgets and the delivery of public services in Northern Ireland have been building for years largely because of the Barnett formula causing spending to grow at a slower rate than in other parts of the United Kingdom. With a mounting list of inescapable pressures and projected departmental overspends of hundreds of millions of pounds, the Assembly must speak with one voice and make the strongest possible case for change from the UK Government.

In light of that, the DUP successfully led the campaign for a new needs-based funding model for Northern Ireland. The previous Government were forced to accept a new definition of need, which will apply to future Barnett consequentials received by the Executive. While that is a step in the right direction, it does not address the impact of that historical underfunding on the size of our block grant. Had Northern Ireland been funded in keeping with the new 124% relative need factor since April 2022, core budgets in our Province would be worth at least £500 million more every year. The failure of the previous Government to ensure that that was the case has left the Executive's finances in an even more precarious position.

While the other parties welcomed the financial package presented by the Government on the return of devolution earlier this year for those reasons, the DUP made it clear that what was offered fell well short of what was required to put our public finances on a stable footing. The failure to baseline the effect of the new formula from the point at which spending in Northern Ireland dropped below need in 2022 will lead to a further cliff edge in just two years' time. At that point, funding levels will again drop below what is required to fairly and sustainably fund services on a comparable basis to those in England and potentially stay there for decades.

The Alliance Party motion calls for a baselined relative need factor above 124% to take account of our policing and justice requirements. However, it is not entirely clear whether it is advocating that that be applied retrospectively from April 2022 or purely on a

prospective basis. That is why we have sought to amend the motion. It is important that, as an Assembly, we are clear and ambitious in pursuing a long-term fiscal framework that is fair and provides the quantum to deliver and transform effective front-line services. The Northern Ireland Fiscal Council made it clear in its updated assessment of relative need in March 2024 that adopting a slightly higher or lower estimate of relative need than 124% will not have much near-time impact on the Executive's spending power if it is not baselined from the point when Northern Ireland dropped below need.

Our amendment also seeks to amend the reference to the cost of division in the motion. The Executive's interim fiscal framework makes no reference to that in the context of the Executive's requirement to publish a sustainability plan. We want to see Departments tackle waste and duplication wherever it is found, but we are also aware of the fact that language is important and that streamlining the delivery of services must not be viewed as an attack on the various national and cultural identities in our society. Notably, the independent review of education and previous studies in Scotland have highlighted that the existence of separate school sectors, for example, does not necessarily lead to additional costs. Where savings could be made, they should not be exaggerated. Indeed, the key finding standing out from the independent review is that, even if all the savings identified were realised, a significant funding gap would remain.

The stabilisation package offered by the Government, while welcome, does not provide a long-term solution to the problems that we have outlined, nor will it provide the impetus or space to take forward the public services transformation agenda in a meaningful way. It also comes with —

Ms Bradshaw: I thank the Member for giving way. I just double-checked the wording of our motion, which states:

"including steps to tackle the cost of division".

Are you implying that there are no costs of division, and, if costs could be identified, we should not be tackling them? Is that what you are saying?

Ms Forsythe: I thank the Member. I am not saying that; I am saying that, by quoting the

independent review of education in Scotland, the savings should not be exaggerated.

Of course, we are willing to take any steps to identify waste, and we do not want to see it in our finances. There is no room for waste. We need efficiencies to deliver our services.

12.00 noon

Going back to the £114 million additional revenue that we have been asked to find, we are clear that it is wrong for Government to simply ask hard-pressed householders to pay more when they have no realistic expectation of seeing better outcomes. Ratepayers in Northern Ireland should not be expected to plug holes in our public services when those holes have been created largely by the Treasury's failure to provide reasonable funding in the first place. Until a fairer, long-term settlement is agreed with Treasury, that will continue to be the DUP's position. I commend the amendment to the House.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Given that amendment No 1 was not moved, the length of the debate will be reduced from two hours to one hour and forty-five minutes.

Mr Sheehan: As my party's spokesperson on education, it is with that particular focus that I want to address the debate. There are not enough resources available in the education system to deliver the level of service that we want and expect for our children and young people and for those charged with educating and nurturing them.

I was highly critical of the actions taken in the absence of an Education Minister, when funding for vital programmes was slashed, for example, cutting the holiday hunger grant, ending the Healthy Happy Minds programme, which was designed to provide support for emotional difficulties, and stopping the provision of free digital learning devices for our most disadvantaged. It baffles me that, in a system that is not resourced properly, officials do not seek to protect and prioritise the most disadvantaged. When I challenged the people from the Department on those cuts, they tried to tell me how difficult it was for them to implement the cuts: imagine how difficult it was for the children and their families who had those vital supports taken away.

Now we have Ministers in place, a draft Programme for Government out for consultation and a set of priorities that we can pursue. While a new Prime Minister has taken up residence in

10 Downing Street, it has become clear that the step change in properly funding our public services here has not materialised. Politics and leadership are about decisions and choices. What does it say about the new Administration in London that one of their first major actions is to leave pensioners out in the cold this winter? For example, it was a choice to make pensioners sit in the cold this winter by cutting their fuel payments while continuing to spend billions of pounds on military hardware.

I would much rather see the new Government invest in our public services so that we can transform our education system, reverse the decline in our school estate, support our children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) and ensure that our pupils can reach their full potential. Those are the choices that the new British Government should concern themselves with. I am a realist, though, and accept that getting a fair funding settlement for this place will not happen overnight.

In my role as my party's education spokesperson, I have taken the opportunity to challenge the Education Minister on his responsibility to identify and set out the priorities for his Department. In a system with limited resources, we must make the most of every penny. Targeting investment on the basis of objective need is vital, particularly when it comes to supporting our most vulnerable children and young people. I want to see the Minister set out a comprehensive plan to tackle educational underachievement, deliver affordable and accessible childcare and transform special educational needs provision. The key is early intervention, and all the evidence tells us that investment at the earlier stage of a child's journey is far more impactful. This is why prioritisation is so important.

Many of the issues that we want to see action on are cross-cutting, and one criticism of the Assembly over the years is that Departments often act in silos and do not talk to each other. It is important to make the point that, where shared objectives exist, Departments should work together and share funding and other resources to achieve them. It makes financial sense; it is a good approach to policy; and, at the end of the day, it is what people want to see: their political representatives working together in the interests of all.

Dr Aiken: The Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion and the amendment. The question for many of us is where we sit with the idea of relative need. Any of us who were on the Finance Committee will have listened to the

Fiscal Council give the Committee its report and talk about where we sit. One question that we have to ask ourselves is this: are we at 124% already, or, as has been suggested by some on the Fiscal Council, might we be above that figure at 125%, 126% or 127%? For all Members, it is important, particularly as the Finance Minister and the First Minister and deputy First Minister go to meet Rachel Reeves this week, to make our case clear. There is no doubt — any of us who have dealt with the Treasury will understand this — that many questions will be asked about where we are going with revenue raising and, with the resources that we have, what we are doing to grow and develop them. Those will be difficult questions to face, because our Budget is not adequate for all the things that we need to do.

My friend on the other side of the House talked about prioritisation. Like many people in this room, I have sat at various tables, particularly at Hillsborough Castle just before Christmas, where we said, "Health is the number-one priority". Health is expensive. All public services are expensive. How we deliver and support that has to be the key.

There will be difficult choices about prioritisation, and we have to make those difficult choices. The rest of our nation — England, Scotland and Wales — is pushing ahead with above-inflation settlements in health. The indications that we are getting from Treasury — you sometimes have to take what Treasury says with a large and notable pinch of salt, but there is no doubt about this — are about the importance of raising the resources that will be needed for health. When that comes back to Northern Ireland as part of our settlement, we will need to make sure that the appropriate levels are given to the Departments that are in most need. Every Department needs a lot, but there has to be a large degree of prioritisation and realism, particularly if we have to make a strong argument for delaying raising revenue.

I sense that, when she returns, the Finance Minister, in whom and in whose ability I have a lot of faith, will have to have really difficult conversations with her Executive partners and, indeed, the House about where we are and where we are likely to go. Those are the critical issues. Many people accuse the House of lacking realism. We all know what the problems are. We all know where the pressures are. We will have to come up with strong answers about how we will deal with the situations and pay for the issues as they go forward.

Minister, I wish you all the best on Thursday. Everybody in the House who wants to see Northern Ireland work wants you to do your best to get the right results, but it will be a difficult autumn. For budgetary reasons, it will be a difficult autumn in which to try to ensure that the Programme for Government matches the resources and the deliverables. All of us have a difficult task ahead, and that is why my party welcomes the motion and the amendment and will support both.

Mr O'Toole: It is good to be back in the Chamber. It is good to be debating fiscal, financial and budgetary matters, and I look forward to doing more of that with my colleagues on the Finance Committee, several of whom have spoken today, and, indeed, with the Finance Minister. We will support the motion but not the amendment, because it is important that there is a specific and explicit reference in the motion to looking at the costs of division.

I say, with some regret, that the costs of division, as far as I am aware, are not mentioned in the Programme for Government. There is therefore a point for us to reflect on, particularly those in the Executive parties. When we come to the Chamber, having tabled motion after motion in order to be declarative, they will be asked and challenged on why those motions do not match what is in Executive policy statements, the Programme for Government and other statements.

When the Executive were restored in February of this year, the SDLP was clear that it would be supportive, cooperative and constructive in its dealings with the Executive and the Executive parties when they sought to maximise the financial settlement for Northern Ireland and make clear arguments for increased funding and a better calculation of need from the British Government. We stuck by that, and we still stick by that. That remains our position. It is clear that the Barnett calculation and the top-up that is used to calculate our funding clearly fell below the level of need. The position was, in a sense, compounded by the overarching question about the austerity policy, on which today's motion reflects.

There are different technical and economic definitions of what "austerity" means, but, generally speaking, it means that the priority for public spending is fiscal restraint, constraining spending and sometimes, although, for the previous British Government, it was usually dominated by spending restraint over raising taxes, it also includes tax increases. Today's motion states that we have borne the brunt of

austerity, and no one can argue with that. It is true to say, despite some of the asinine comments in earlier business, that my party has noted and been disappointed by the failure to set a proper trajectory for moving beyond austerity in UK politics and in public spending.

I note, however, that it is also important that, in a devolved context, we here, particularly those who hold power on the Executive, do all in our power to maximise and improve public services and to deliver for the public who elect us here within the constraints that exist, while acknowledging and pushing against those constraints and fighting for more funding.

What I saw yesterday in the Programme for Government was not, I am afraid, a clear set of targets for the public in Northern Ireland. I look forward to a multi-year Budget, and I hope that it is aligned with the rather vague and gauzy targets in yesterday's Programme for Government. I do not agree with the Member who moved the motion that the Programme for Government represents some grand step forward in delivering for the people of Northern Ireland. It is largely a set of hazy, unspecific targets and aspirations rather than specific or promised outcomes with interventions and plans to deliver them.

I also note, unfortunately, although it was mentioned in the proposer's speech, that the motion does not talk about political instability, dysfunction and some of the other decisions that have not been made in Northern Ireland. We have agency. We now have a new Government, and I acknowledge that successive Tory Governments — first the Tory/Lib Dem Coalition Government and then reckless Tory Governments — did not give this place enough funding and as much as we would like and we need. We are here, however. We all sought election and have come to the Chamber to be in devolved government, and Members have taken ministerial office for the purpose of making lives better. It is therefore disappointing that the motion does not talk about having agency and about the actions that can be taken here, because people do not elect us simply to deflect responsibility. Yes, by all means, we need to be clear that the British Government have not funded this place properly, and we need be clear and united in calling for a better funding settlement. The Opposition will be with the Executive parties in doing that, but we also need to see clear plans. I would like to hear from the Minister about when we will see a Budget sustainability plan and when we will have a multi-year Budget. I assume that it will be when there is one from

the UK Government, but I would like to hear about those plans being in place.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr O'Toole: I would also like to hear about the ambition for this place and the ambition for rescuing public services and growing our economy, with specific targets provided and not the hazy, gauzy aspirations that we got yesterday.

Ms Kimmins: I welcome the motion. It is crucial that we keep this important issue front and centre.

12.15 pm

It has been reiterated numerous times during this mandate that the Assembly remains united in the view that we have been and continue to be underfunded by the British Government relative to the level of need across the North. In particular, the current level of funding for health and social care services is unsustainable, given the current demand and the projected need for service capacity now and for the future.

As others highlighted, the waiting lists here are among the worst in western Europe, with thousands of patients awaiting procedures. While waiting, they are in pain and distress, which ensures that their conditions continue to deteriorate. By the time that they are seen, they are much worse than they were at the beginning. Our emergency departments are overcrowded, and many patients wait for unreasonably long periods before being assessed and treated in our hospitals. Hospitals are under constant strain, and overstretched bed capacity is now the norm in wards, with unstaffed beds or beds beyond the capacity of the ward now commonplace. That fails not only patients but staff, who work in the most unsafe conditions under extreme pressure.

Many patients are unable to be discharged when they are medically fit to leave hospital, due to the lack of domiciliary care packages. That needs to be addressed urgently to keep our health service functioning properly. With an ageing population, community care is a vital component of our health and social care system to ensure that patients are discharged when they should be and with the appropriate support to allow them to return to their own homes. It is well-evidenced that people who remain in hospital for prolonged periods are more likely to experience further deterioration in health through mobility problems, infections and other

conditions that could have been avoided had they been discharged at the right time. That, in turn, puts increased pressure on our overall health service as patients' medical and care needs increase.

Caring is an extremely important profession, and that cannot be overstated. We need proper investment in social care to ensure that care workers are properly valued for the essential role that they play in the functioning of our health service and in ensuring that people can not only live longer but live well for longer. Across our health service, healthcare workers struggle to cope with the demands placed on them in clinical settings. Many professions report high levels of burnout. That has resulted in our losing doctors, nurses, consultants and many other essential staff to other jurisdictions and countries where pay and, most importantly, conditions are much more attractive. There, they can do the job that they trained to do and that they love in a much safer environment.

We have seen the impact of that, particularly on children's social work teams across the North. With staff leaving or going off sick due to the stress and pressure that they are under, some teams have been left with no staff, and others operate with a minimum of staff. That has a detrimental effect on not only staff but children, young people and their families, an effect that will cause untold, long-term damage to their future and for generations to come. It is therefore essential that plans be developed to address the serious recruitment and retention issues facing our health and social care workforce: without people, we have no health service.

Our health service is undoubtedly beyond crisis point and is probably the single biggest issue that I, and many others in the Chamber, will be contacted about in relation to the experience and views of staff, patients and trade unions every single day. It affects us all, including our families and friends. It is crystal clear that, if we want to deliver properly for patients and staff, we need proper transformation and investment in health and social care. It is therefore imperative that the British Government provide the appropriate funding to match the level of need, not just for the here and now but to protect our health service's long-term future.

We must continue to stand together to keep the best interests and health of our people front and centre and to challenge this new Labour Government to step up to the plate and provide the funding that we need now.

Mr Mathison: Alliance has long highlighted the need for a fairer funding settlement for Northern Ireland, and we have been clear that the fiscal floor needs to be set at a level higher than 124% if we are to address the level of need, particularly in justice and policing, as we debated yesterday, and to address the years of underfunding of the Justice budget. The motion sets out clearly its call on the UK Government in that regard, and I hope that it receives support.

This afternoon, I will reflect on the wider issues around the need for transformation in our public services and for an Executive sustainability plan. I want to look particularly at issues in our education system. The financial pressures in the education system are well rehearsed, and I do not intend to go through them all in detail. Suffice to say, we spend £450 less per pupil per annum than is spent in England. I have no doubt that we all agree that that is unsustainable and that more investment is required. However, the system that we invest that money into matters. Our education system in Northern Ireland is divided, complex and desperately in need of a programme of transformation. Any Executive sustainability plan must commit to "tackle the cost of division" — it is vital that that wording remains in the motion, particularly when we look at education in Northern Ireland — and it must deliver genuine transformation in our education system.

Research that was carried out by Ulster University into the cost of division in education in Northern Ireland suggested that it could run to the tune of £226 million per year. The Education Department came out very quickly to reject those figures, but I am unaware of any work that has been done subsequently by the Department to assess the cost of division in education.

Mr O'Toole: I appreciate the Member giving way. This is a genuine point of interest, because I agree with him on some of the cost-of-division points. That is why we have been very loud on the issue of taking money away from integrated schools. I am genuinely interested to know this: if we are spending less per head on pupils than is being spent in GB, but we are also spending too much on education because we have too many school buildings and villages with two schools where there should be one, how do those two things marry up? Is it that we are spending too much on maintenance? How do those two things agree with one another?

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

Mr Mathison: Thank you. I appreciate that how we have ended up in this situation in our education system is a bit of a conundrum. There is a need for more investment in the system, but the question is about how we invest. We spend too much money on maintaining the divisions in the system, whether that is in a passive sense by not doing anything to tackle it, or, at times, by actively doing something. I appreciate the Member's comments. We are in a conundrum with this, and, often, ministerial questions do not draw out any clarity on that point, unfortunately.

I emphasise that the Education Minister has categorically stated in response to questions on the cost of division that he has no intention of carrying out any departmental audit on the cost of division to his Department. Therefore, I can see no commitment to tackling the issue, and that must change. Delivering on the clear public demand for integrated education is just one way that the Department could do that. Legal obligations exist in that space, and we need to see real progress on that front as part of any programme of transformation.

The independent review of education was very clear that our current configuration of schools reflects a divided system and creates inefficiencies. Modelling that was undertaken as part of that review was clear that the network of schools could be reduced and that that could generate an estimated cost saving of around £94 million per year. That would require some capital investment — it is important to understand that — but we must begin to think more ambitiously around a programme that is focused on investing to save.

One area where there has been a commitment to transformation work, and it was committed to in the draft Programme for Government, is special educational needs. That is welcome, but the Education Minister must continue to prioritise a clear transformation action plan for SEN. I am very clear that that must be time-bound and have measurable outcomes by which we can measure success. Our SEN services must deliver early identification of need and early intervention to meet that. Investment in a broken system of SEN services will not deliver for our children, and a meaningful transformation action plan must be delivered without delay.

Finally, if we are discussing responsible and sustainable spending in education, I must highlight the issue of the Strule campus.

Contractors have been appointed to deliver that £375 million project, but, in response to a question for written answer that I recently submitted, the Education Minister has confirmed that its business case was unable to demonstrate value for money. I can think of no other education capital project where that would be accepted. The investment in their buildings is, of course, welcome for those schools, but this is not a sustainable way to spend the Executive's money.

A better and fairer financial settlement is needed for Northern Ireland, as is real investment in public services in GB, which would lead to that flow of resource here. However, more than that, an Executive sustainability plan is absolutely vital if we are to be responsible custodians of the resources that we have. Nowhere is that needed more than in education. We have a system that is full of committed and passionate educators and pupils who deserve the very best system in which resources are used effectively. They must not be held back by a system that is divided and in desperate need of reform.

Mr Donnelly: I support the motion, following on from the contributions of my party colleagues from Upper Bann and Strangford. In particular, as one of the Alliance spokespersons on health, I want to discuss the pressures that are facing our health service. There is no question that Northern Ireland has been underfunded by successive UK Governments, and the 14-year term of the previous Conservative Government has had a particularly devastating impact on public services across the UK. Unfortunately, we will continue to be affected by the long-term impacts of austerity, Brexit and the disastrous mini Budget of 2022. We welcome the interim fiscal framework, which was agreed with the UK Government, as an important first step, but the 124% relative need factor is not sufficient for our needs, especially those of the Department of Justice, as my party colleagues and independent analysis have outlined.

Our health service is in crisis, which the Chair of the Health Committee mentioned, and the funding has a role in that. However, we must be honest and acknowledge the fact that additional funding to Health will not solve the many challenges that we face. Per capita, health spending in Northern Ireland has been significantly higher than that in the rest of the UK and has increased at a higher rate than in the rest of the UK, yet we have by far the longest waiting lists in western Europe, as mentioned, and the worst outcomes. We need to discuss why that is. The problem is not exclusively a lack of funding; if anything, the

fundamental problem is a lack of reform and transformation.

As the Bengoa report of 2016 stated, the options that we face are to see services deteriorate to the point of collapse or to embrace transformation and create a modern, sustainable service that is properly equipped to help everyone who needs care. However, while parties signed up to Bengoa in principle, that has not always been reflected by action. It has been nearly eight years since Bengoa was published, yet we have seen almost none of the transformation that is required, in part because of the resistance to change in the delivery of services, which may be controversial in the short term but which will deliver better outcomes in the long term. We still have certain parties opposing changes that contradict the principles that are required for transformation. That is disappointing, and we cannot resolve the challenges that face our health service until that is addressed. We know that Professor Bengoa will return to Northern Ireland later this autumn, and I cannot help but wonder what he will make of the situation eight years on.

We also need to acknowledge that we cannot exclusively fund Health to the detriment of other Departments. Health takes up around half of the block grant. That amounts to £7.6 billion in this year's Budget, which the then Health Minister said was still not enough. Notably, that has increased from £4.6 billion in 2015-16, when the Bengoa report was written. If we were to adopt the additional funding that the Health Minister requested, it would result in substantial cuts to other Departments' budgets. As we heard in yesterday's debate on policing resources, the Health Minister's party was critical of what it perceived to be the absence of progress from the Justice Minister on police funding and police officer numbers, yet it has not acknowledged the impact of the repeated underfunding of the Department of Justice relative to other Departments.

That is yet another reason why we need to address the broader under-functioning of the Executive. One issue that we cannot ignore is the need for political reform. Another reason for the crisis in our health service, as well as in other Departments, is the complete absence of political leadership for the last two years and three of the last five years in the previous mandate. The Bengoa report is eight years old, and, in that time, we have had five years of no government. Both the two main parties, Sinn Féin and the DUP, have walked away from the Executive and the Assembly, leaving the rest of us locked out from delivering any change. Until we reform the institutions so that no one party

can collapse them and prevent them functioning again, we will not be able to deliver the long-term reforms that are needed for the health service.

For example, we cannot plan for the future through multi-year Budgets if there is no certainty that an Executive will be in place. Political stability is necessary for reforming and addressing the challenges in the health service. It should not be lost on any of us that the Assembly is currently as stable as it was the day before the last collapse. As the chair of the all-party group on climate action, it would be remiss of me not to mention the need for the UK Government to invest if we are not only to tackle the climate crisis but benefit from the opportunities that transitioning to a greener economy will bring.

As a member of the Health Committee, I look forward to working constructively with the Health Minister and to seeing his plan to deliver the transformation that our health service desperately needs in order to begin to address the huge waiting lists and the service's internal pressures.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Gerry, it is normally a courtesy for people to be in the Chamber at least for part of the debate. I am going to call you anyway. You have three minutes.

Mr Carroll: Thanks, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I apologise for not being in earlier. I had a meeting to attend.

The fact that there is a deep crisis in our health and social care system is news to no one.

The chronic underfunding of our schools is not a new problem. This is not the first time that we have discussed the Government's failure to invest in housing, infrastructure or protecting our environment. What is new is that, after some 15 years of implementing austerity on behalf of the British Government, some parties here have suddenly changed tack.

12.30 pm

Every bad decision, every cut and every attack on public services by the Tories was, effectively, quietly agreed to by Sinn Féin and the DUP, and by the Alliance Party as well. If members of the public are following the debate today, they might reasonably ask what has caused the change of heart. Was it the people lying in hospital corridors or languishing on a health waiting list? Was it the children whose

education is stymied by the under-resourcing of our schools or the special educational needs pupils and their families, referred to earlier, denied a school place in the first instance? Was it the fact that so many poorly paid public-sector workers are struggling to make ends meet? Was it even the many people sleeping rough on our streets or the homeless families whose lives are put on hold and devastated because they do not have a place to call home?

People watching may have thought that those things inspired the change of heart, but they would be mistaken. When you look at the motion in the face of all the suffering that we see in our communities — I mentioned some of it — and in our public services, you see that the Alliance Party motion tells us that the place where the cuts are most sharply felt just so happens to be the Department run by their party leader. If they are seriously telling us that the police are suffering the worst of Stormont's cuts, I would respectfully invite them to think and look at that point again.

I would invite them to tell that to the workers and the patients in our health service, to those on the housing waiting list, to the parents who cannot afford childcare, to the pupils and teachers who, disgracefully, have to fundraise for classroom supplies and to the pensioners who cannot heat their homes thanks to the Government's cuts. However, we should make absolutely no mistake about it: the parties that bemoan the economic policies of Westminster are preparing for more of the same. The Executive parties that implemented the cruel and punishing policies of the Tories for years are now preparing to roll over for Keir Starmer's right-wing Labour party as they promise more years of hardship.

Come next month, when Sinn Féin, the DUP and Alliance sign off lightly on a new austerity Budget and proceed with the cuts as before —

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

Mr Carroll: — we will just see how things have changed.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I will call Timothy Gaston. Timothy, you were not in the Chamber when I said to Gerry that it is normally a courtesy to be in for a debate rather than to walk in and expect to get the full five minutes, so you are getting three if you wish to avail yourself of them.

Mr Gaston: Thank you very much. While it is safe to assume that Alliance did not have this as a consideration when tabling the motion, it does come at an opportune time for the TUV, as my party will today be submitting proposals on the matter to the Treasury, where these decisions are actually made.

Between the mid-1970s and the later parts of the 2010s, Northern Ireland was funded relatively generously by Westminster. During 2020, however, the block grant funding to Northern Ireland fell to the UK Government definition of need. Then, in April 2022, Northern Ireland became the first part of the UK to be funded below the UK Government's own definition of need since its adoption in 2012.

In order to have a sensible discussion about those developments, we need to review them in the context of appreciation of the development of UK policy around need. The first part of the UK to really struggle with the Barnett squeeze was Wales during the noughties. In 2007, the Welsh Government appointed Professor Gerry Holtham to review the impact of the squeeze and to develop a metric for measuring what Wales needed in order to justify intervention to make sure that the squeeze did not take Wales below that level.

Holtham explained that the only way that he could develop a meaningful metric was on a UK-wide basis, assessing how funds should be allocated across the whole of the UK, mindful of local need, with the objective that, regardless of where people lived, we should all have access to broadly comparable public services. The Holtham formula demonstrated that, in order for people in Wales to enjoy the same level of public services as people in England, the Government, because of the higher need in Wales, needed to spend £115 per head for every £100 spent in England. The equivalent figure for Scotland was £105 per head, and in Northern Ireland it was £121 per head.

Holtham's calculations took place before the devolution of justice in Northern Ireland, and the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council has since made appropriate adjustments to apply the Holtham formula.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gaston: In that updated context, the definition of need for Northern Ireland has increased to £124. Go on ahead.

Mr O'Toole: I appreciate the Member giving way. I am interested to hear the very interesting

dissection of the politics of devolution and fiscal policy in relation to devolved entities. My assumption or thought was that the TUV completely opposes devolution in all its forms. Is that right? I thought that you did not want this Chamber to exist at all.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute. I remind Members that interventions are supposed to be shorter than speeches.

Mr Gaston: Thank you very much for the intervention. Indeed, Westminster rule is certainly my preference, but we have to work with what we have.

The UK Government embraced the Holtham formula in 2012 when they committed to intervene to ensure that the block grant funding to Wales would not fall below the Holtham definition of need at £115, and that is something that they started doing every financial year from 2017-18 and have continued to do ever since. The funding of Northern Ireland was £3 below the UK definition of need in 2022-23 and 2023-24, even as the UK Government intervened to make sure that block grant funding to Wales did not fall below need. That constituted an arrangement that was obviously unjust and indefensible. The UK Government cannot have a UK definition of need and then deploy it to protect some UK Welsh citizens while refusing to protect UK Northern Ireland citizens. Northern Ireland was badly let down by the fiscal framework negotiated by the Government at the end of last year.

While we do not argue that Northern Ireland should be funded at £19 above the need like in Scotland, we are equally clear that the trauma of being funded below that need is so serious that we insist on nothing less than that, and the same protections afforded to other parts of the UK threatened by funding below need must now be afforded to us. The fiscal framework denies that on two counts. First, the framework does not hold the UK Government to the Wales precedent in that it does not clearly fund Northern Ireland to the £124 baseline from 2022, so we are denied the clarity afforded to Wales.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Gaston, your time is up.

Mr Gaston: Thank you very much.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance to respond. I advise you that you have 15 minutes.

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. [*Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.*] I welcome the opportunity to provide an update to the Assembly on our budgetary outlook.

It is no secret that the Executive are facing significant budgetary challenges. Since taking up office, I have been consistently clear about the scale of those challenges and also consistent in calling out the underfunding of our public services and the damage caused by 14 years of austerity under the Tories. I have made the case to the new British Government, as I did to the previous Government, that we need to see a change of approach that prioritises investment in public services and public-sector workers.

The Executive are committed to speaking with one voice and will continue to make the case for additional funding for public services, but the reality is, with the Prime Minister and Chancellor at pains to warn of a painful Budget coming in October, there is little hope of additional funding being provided outside of Barnett consequentials, and the Barnett formula will not deliver the additional funding that we need. It is also clear that the previous Government's failure to raise budgets to take account of inflation has greatly contributed to the pressure on our public services.

Members will be well familiar with Ministers speaking to the difficulties of their budgets. I commissioned an urgent exercise over the summer to get a clear picture of the current financial position, and, unfortunately, despite the efforts of many Ministers to manage their budgets, it is clear that it is extremely challenging. I have said many times that the demands on our finances far outstrip the funding available. Departments are currently reporting £767 million of pressures above their budget. The greatest pressures are in Health, Education and Justice, which together account for almost 90% of the total pressure. Some 55% of the total pressure comes from public-sector pay, based upon pay body recommendations. I have been clear with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that our public-sector workers are critical to service delivery and that it is crucial that the Executive have sufficient funds available to enable them to meet the cost of public-sector pay awards.

We know that there will be further Barnett consequentials this year because of allocations in England, but we will only get full certainty on our share towards the end of the year. I am not willing to delay until then and see services deteriorate further while we wait, so I will bring proposals to the Executive to increase departmental budgets by our latest assessment of what our Barnett share will be for the rest of the year. It is expected that that will allow the allocation of around £500 million. While that will fall short of the overcommitment that Departments are currently reporting, it will go a significant way towards addressing the pressures. However, all Ministers will have to play their part by living within their budget once the funding is provided.

Mr Beattie: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Archibald: I have a lot to get through.

Not doing so would have grave consequences for future funding. Any overspend would come off next year's Budget. Even more concerning, the Treasury has been explicit that not living within budget would result in the Executive having to repay the £559 million that the Treasury had agreed to write off, making an already difficult financial situation even worse.

Along with my Executive colleagues, I will continue to make the case for adequate funding of our public services, but I remain hugely concerned that the ramifications of not living within budget this year would represent a potentially disastrous outcome for the Executive and our public services. At the Executive meeting last week, I outlined to my ministerial colleagues the need for urgent action to be taken. Collectively, we must ensure that a balanced Budget is delivered. I am meeting individual Ministers to discuss the budgetary challenges, and collectively, as an Executive, we will need to chart a way forward. I will continue to make the case to the British Government that more funding is needed for public services to support our workers, families and businesses and will raise that at a meeting with the Chancellor later this week.

Difficult times require courageous leadership. Last week, the Executive agreed the draft Programme for Government (PFG), demonstrating our determination to deliver for people. The draft PFG sets out our immediate priorities and will guide where we invest our funding. One of its priorities is the reform and transformation of our public services. We are committed to delivering positive change and playing our part in making our finances sustainable. We will look at all options to deliver

efficiencies, generate revenue, enhance borrowing powers and examine fiscal devolution. Financial sustainability will require collaborative working as well as innovation and efficiency in the delivery of services.

I agree that, in the longer term, we must seek a funding arrangement that provides appropriate levels of funding and fiscal responsibility. I was pleased to sign an interim fiscal framework on behalf of the Executive in May this year, which was an early and significant milestone as we work towards putting our finances on a more sustainable footing. It is already making a difference, with an additional £60 million being provided so far this year, and it will result in further additional funding for the Executive this year and in the years to come. Importantly, it recognises that, until budgets are confirmed at the spending review, the Executive will continue to plan on the assumption that they will be funded at or above the 124% level of relative need in future financial years. It also includes a firm commitment from the British Government to review the Executive's funding, including concerns about the 2026-27 funding, as well as considering a review of our level of need if multiple independent and credible sources provide evidence that our relative need is different from 124%.

I believe that spending on public services by the British Government is too low and that there are unique characteristics that may push our overall level of need above 124%. Members should also recognise the Fiscal Council's assertion that 124% is a reasonable estimate and that socio-economic data would not necessarily support an increase in the need calculation. However, I am focusing on ensuring that we have the evidence base in place to negotiate for a higher needs-based factor in future. My officials are working to build on the robust, independent evidence base that we already have for our level of relative need, thanks to the Fiscal Council. That work includes working with independent experts and other Departments. Further work is also being progressed by the new fiscal team established in my Department on how we can enhance our financial management tools, such as increasing our level of borrowing and taking greater control of fiscal levers through additional fiscal devolution.

Mr McNulty: Will the Minister give way?

12.45 pm

Dr Archibald: I have a lot to get through, sorry.

We will examine those options as part of the considerations for our final fiscal framework. That will be detailed work, and it will take time to deliver.

Work is also ongoing on developing the Budget sustainability plan. As Treasury was unable to engage formally with us during the pre-election period and given the need to secure formal Executive agreement for the plan, I have agreed a short extension with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. There is an inherent challenge in presenting a Budget sustainability plan with the current level of overcommitment that I have outlined, but we must strive to bridge the gap. I intend to publish the plan at the end of September, subject, of course, to securing Executive agreement in the next couple of weeks. I confirm to the leader of the Opposition that it is also my intention to align with the spending review announced by the British Government, one year in October and then in spring in the following two years.

The publication of the sustainability plan is a stepping stone to the Executive's larger ambition of securing and maintaining sustainable Budgets. It is the first stage in a process that will set the Executive's finances on a more stable trajectory. The path to sustainable finances is not straightforward and will require decisions that will impact on the public services that the Executive deliver. With some six months of the current financial year already having passed, achieving fiscal balance in 2024-25 will prove challenging, but, as I have outlined, not delivering a balanced Budget is simply not an option.

Finally, the motion calls on the British Government to depart from their austerity policy and implement different fiscal rules or different taxation systems. I absolutely agree with the wider call to change the approach to austerity and to implement more progressive taxation systems. The new British Government have choices to make about how they spend their money and how they raise their money and who will shoulder the burden. Those who can afford most should pay most. Investing in public services and supporting ordinary workers and families should be the priorities. My Department and I will continue to engage with the Treasury and the British Government on securing a final fiscal framework that provides certainty on finances in the longer term. In the interim, however, we must face up to the challenges, strive to live within our budgets and avoid a scenario in 2025-26 of having to pay back any overspend from this year along with a further £559 million from previous years. We must do that by taking the responsible decisions that are

needed in order to achieve financial balance this year.

I call on Members to support Ministers and to work in partnership with us to navigate the challenges ahead, recognising that we cannot do everything that we would want to do. It will not be easy, but it is the right thing to do to help us deliver change in the longer term.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Paul Frew to wind on amendment No 2. Paul, you have five minutes.

Mr Frew: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. When it comes to politics and governance, it is all about priorities and choices, especially for sovereign Governments. That is why I despair when I hear Chancellor after Chancellor talk about there being black holes here and black holes there, because there is no such thing as a black hole with a sovereign Government. If they do not have enough money, they raise more money or prioritise what they spend money on. For a sovereign Government such as the UK's, which spends billions, what they spend that money on is a choice. The Labour Government's decision to cut winter fuel payments is disastrous. It will cost them money in the long run, but it will also cost lives.

It is different in the case of a devolved Government. Devolved Governments have to settle for funding settlements: envelopes of money or, more realistically, packages of funding. Although we have limited fiscal powers, we have limited reach when it comes to the ways in which we can raise money. The ways in which we might raise money through revenue raising are primitive. That is a challenge that we have to face. The Finance Minister will have to face that challenge, along with the sustainability plan. Not only do the UK Government want a published sustainability plan but they want to see £113 million in additional revenue. That is a challenge for everyone in the House. How do we get that revenue? Do we take it from our people?

Mr Tennyson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: No, I will not, because I have only five minutes.

It is about tough decisions in this place. The question that I pose today is this: are we up for making those tough decisions to assist our people?

I am glad that we now have a Programme for Government, because, when you talk about a finance situation and a budgetary burden, money must follow strategy. It is bonkers to have a Budget without a Programme for Government, and it is bonkers to have a Programme for Government that is not aligned to a Budget. The closer we get to the position where the two are aligned and run in parallel, the better it will be for our people and for this place.

I am disappointed that the SDLP and Alliance will not support our amendment, because we should place it on record every time we get the opportunity that funding for this place has fallen below need and should have been retrospectively paid. Think about it like this: if it were not for the various agreements, including the confidence-and-supply arrangement and the money that came from that, we would be in a much worse place.

I am aggrieved that the mover of the motion, of all the spending that has taken place since the Alliance Party has been in the Executive, picked on the £250,000 of spend by the Education Minister that will assist teachers and principals and assist with addressing cyberbullying and the massive mental health and well-being problem that we have in our country.

Mr Tennyson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will not, because I have limited time.

The Alliance Party blames not supporting our amendment on the fact that we have withdrawn the "division" part of its motion, but I remind the Alliance Party that it supported division. It supported and voted for a vaccine certification scheme on the basis of the lie that it stopped transmission. The scheme coerced and discriminated against people, creating a "them and us" society. Some £21.5 million was spent on that division. The Alliance Party is a party of division. The SDLP, of course, wanted to go further: it wanted to sack nurses. The Alliance Party cannot wash its hands of that recent decision, which, of course, was implemented by the UUP. We will not let it off lightly either.

When we talk about budgetary pressures, we should talk about the cost of the lockdown that those parties also supported. The cost to our people's health was in the millions of pounds, and we still live with those consequences.

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

The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. This debate will continue after Question Time, when Nuala McAllister will be the next Member to speak as she winds up on the motion.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.53 pm.

On resuming —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn.

Ammonia Strategy: Update

1. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the renewed ammonia strategy. (AQO 751/22-27)

Mr Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I thank the Member for her question. It is important that the ammonia strategy delivers the most effective measures to protect our environment. To do that, I need to consider all the relevant information available to me. Following a consultation in 2023, my Department considered the responses and used the information to inform a reworked draft ammonia strategy. However, I wish to seek additional views on proposed mandatory ammonia reduction measures, which will be included as part of the consultation process during the 2024 nutrients action programme review. To allow time for that process to take place, I anticipate that it will be 2025 before the ammonia strategy is finalised and ready for me to take to the Executive for approval and publication.

I am aware that although agriculture makes a significant contribution to Northern Ireland's economy, it produces 97% of current ammonia emissions. Action on ammonia is urgently required to support our local farm businesses and rural communities to thrive and be sustainable while, at the same time, protecting our environment and meeting our legislative requirements. It is essential that the ammonia strategy is science-led and can deliver measures that protect nature, meet Northern Ireland's legal obligations and ensure a sustainable agriculture sector.

Ms Sheerin: Thanks to the Minister for that answer. Minister, you referred in your answer to the mandatory ammonia reduction strategies, which, obviously, farmers will be required to adhere to. What consideration have you given to the cost of doing that, particularly for smaller

farmers, and the practicalities of that sort of machinery in areas of natural constraint? I am concerned that that might work against farmers who are trying to break into an industry that is calling out for producers.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her question. She touches on an important issue, because we need to incentivise uptake of the technology that is being outlined. I wrote to the DEFRA Secretary of State in London about future agriculture funding for Northern Ireland and made the case for us having separate and additional funding, which I consider to be the just transition fund for agriculture. That would be capital funding to enable the uptake of the technology. Further to that letter, I will engage with the Secretary of State when I am in London next Monday.

Miss McIlveen: When officials were asked at the Committee why planning applications for replacement buildings that would lead to lower ammonia emissions are not assessed differently to new developments, we were told:

"The regulations don't give any scope for us to consider any difference between new and replacement developments, but we do totally understand the frustration that this must cause".

Acknowledging those frustrations, will the Minister commit to changing those regulations, which are having a perverse impact on the outcomes that he wants to achieve?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. Reductions in ammonia emissions in existing facilities will be taken into account in the new operational protocol to assess the impacts of air pollution on the natural environment, but the remaining level of ammonia pollution is the key factor that must be used by DAERA to provide advice to planning authorities. Further to my response, I understand the issue that you are outlining, which is otherwise known as betterment. I will be engaging with stakeholders about that in the days ahead as part of a ministerial round-table that I have convened on the issue. It is important that we have dialogue and engage on the matter and the general issue of ammonia.

Mr McNulty: Given the recent critical report on river basin management plans by the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP), what steps will the Minister take to ensure that the new ammonia strategy is fully compliant with the water framework directive regulations and contributes significantly to the water framework

directive's environmental objectives? What lessons could your Department learn from what Teagasc is doing in the South in relation to engagement and being proactive —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mr McNulty: — about protecting river basins?

Mr Muir: The Member asked two questions. One was about engagement. As I outlined to Michelle McIlveen, that is something that I have prioritised. I have convened a ministerial round-table on the issue of ammonia to engage with stakeholders. The other one was about the Office for Environmental Protection's report last week on river basin management plans. I have put it clearly on the record that I accept the recommendations that were set out in that report. It is important that, whatever we do on ammonia or other matters that are in my portfolio, we act in accordance with the law. That is the space that I am in.

Last week, I talked an awful lot about water quality. Today, we are talking about ammonia and air quality. We need to have the same focus on air quality issues that we have on water in our responsibility for dealing with those issues. We have seen water quality issues playing out in our rivers, lakes and loughs in Northern Ireland, but air quality is also a serious concern. Just because it is not as visible, it does not mean that we should not take heed of the legal obligations to act.

Lord Elliott: I have a quick question about responses by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) to planning applications where ammonia is an issue. Those responses seem to have been delayed again and again. Is there any update on the situation being progressed or getting any better?

Mr Muir: First, I congratulate Lord Elliott on his elevation to the other place. Congratulations on that. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency is doing what it can on planning applications, but we have to act in accordance with the law and ensure that our advice is given appropriately and reflects the law. There are also resource constraints. It is important that we recognise that statutory consultees act within the resources that are available to them. We have done what we can in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, but the budget for the next financial year will be important in allowing us provide those resources to the environment agency so that it can respond to the planning applications.

Mr Gaston: We have been assured that the current method that DAERA uses to assess planning applications, which was announced on 19 December 2023, is now fit for purpose and informed by science and evidence. As the emerging ammonia strategy is to be published shortly —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: A question, Mr Gaston.

Mr Gaston: — will the Minister confirm that the current robust science-led approach will remain in place until the new strategy is announced, thus ensuring that those who have their planning applications in the system already will not see the goalposts moved again?

Mr Muir: As Minister, I will always be guided by the evidence and science, particularly on ammonia. If the evidence and science were to change, it would be negligent of me not to respond to that. I cannot say that nothing will change in the future, but it is important that we are guided by the evidence and science. That is why we are having discussions at the ministerial round-table about the situation as it presents itself to me.

XL Bully Dogs

2. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department has considered introducing a ban on the ownership of XL bully dogs, following the ban recently announced in the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 752/22-27)

Mr Muir: I have enacted legislation to restrict and control the ownership of XL bully dogs, and I am pleased that my ministerial colleague in the Republic of Ireland has moved to align legislation across the island. I understand that the rules there will broadly mirror the legal requirements that are already in place here and in the rest of the UK. For example, breeding, selling and rehoming XL bully dogs will be prohibited in the Republic of Ireland from 1 October 2024, matching the legal restrictions that I introduced here on 5 July.

It will be illegal to own an XL bully dog in the Republic of Ireland without a certificate of exemption from 1 February 2025, which is one month after it will become illegal here. In the Republic of Ireland, the certificates will be issued only to owners who can prove that their dog has a licence and is microchipped and neutered. That is broadly in line with the conditions for exemption that I introduced in Northern Ireland.

Mr Chambers: Minister, when you brought the matter before the House in March, I asked a supplementary question about my concerns about dogs in residential settings. We agreed that there was "no perfect solution", but you said that you "could not live" with yourself if you did not do something. You brought forward that legislation, and I know that those words were spoken with sincerity. Given the number of fatalities and serious maulings, in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, in recent months in residential settings —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Chambers, is there a question, please?

Mr Chambers: — will the Minister perhaps reflect on whether the perfect solution might be a complete ban on those dogs?

Mr Muir: I am aware of the Member's ongoing concerns about potential attacks by XL bully dogs in residential settings. The safeguards that I introduced are aimed at protecting public safety. Placing legal restrictions on a dog in the home is neither feasible, practical nor enforceable and would severely impinge upon an owner's ability to look after and enjoy time with their dog in a private dwelling. The fact is that all dog owners are responsible for controlling their dog whether they are in public or private settings. My Department continues to promote responsible dog ownership, and I urge all dog owners to educate themselves about their dog's needs and to be aware of changes in behaviour or temperament. If Assembly colleagues or stakeholders advocating for further legislation to provide protection in a residential setting where an XL bully dog is kept can provide viable suggestions, my officials will consider any such detail received.

Mr Honeyford: Given that we live on an island and that this is an issue right across it, can the Minister give us more information on the engagement that he has had with his counterparts in the South?

Mr Muir: I met Minister Humphreys and Secretary General Mary Hurley on 22 July 2024 and had productive discussions on current issues, including the banning of XL bully dogs. My officials have also met their Republic of Ireland counterparts to discuss implementation processes and any potential cross-border issues. That engagement is ongoing. I am committed to working with Minister Humphreys and our counterpart not only on XL bully safeguards but on wider dog control issues and the promotion of dog ownership across this island.

Puppy Farming and Breeding

3. **Mrs Erskine** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline how his Department will address illegal puppy farming and breeding. (AQO 753/22-27)

Mr Muir: I would like to highlight the robust legislation that Northern Ireland already has in place to regulate commercial dog-breeding establishments. The Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 empower councils to license and inspect potential or current breeding establishments. The 2013 regulations also provide powers for council inspectors to act if a commercial breeder does not meet the standards required. That includes the power to suspend or revoke a licence. Unlicensed commercial breeders and licence holders who breach the conditions of those regulations can face prosecution, and a conviction carries a maximum penalty of six months imprisonment and/or a fine of £5,000.

To combat the illegal breeding and trafficking of low-welfare pups, my Department supports the councils and other statutory bodies under the Paws for Thought initiative. That initiative, chaired by my Department, comprises representatives from the Police Service of Northern Ireland, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, councils, Belfast Harbour Police, ferry companies and my Department's animal welfare policy, enforcement and portal inspection teams. In addition, my Department continues to work with councils and the other relevant statutory bodies to promote messages and communications that urge the public to secure dogs from reputable and licensed breeders.

I am conscious that dog breeding is an area where stakeholders express concern and that more action will be required in the time ahead. Therefore, I am keen to explore their views on what action they believe is needed as well as discussing my intention to introduce a version of Lucy's law to Northern Ireland.

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Minister for his answer. It will be no surprise to him that this is a very hot topic in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. He referenced Lucy's law, and I welcome a commitment to that. I want to ensure that there are no loopholes in the legislation where breeders —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Question, please.

Mrs Erskine: — act legally within what has been set out. Can he commit that he will also look at how those people act legally but may have a loophole in the system that they can access?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her question. When we are designing legislation and policy around animal welfare, we need to be very conscious of the issue that she has outlined about people's ability to navigate the legislation and create loopholes around it all. That is why it is important that, when we are developing it, we do it correctly.

On Lucy's law, I am conscious that Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK that is yet to introduce legislation to regulate the third-party sale of pups and kittens. Therefore, I would like to confirm that it remains my intention to deliver a version of Lucy's law in Northern Ireland within the lifetime of this Assembly. My officials are developing options for my consideration, and I will carefully consider all options and then decide on the best one for appropriately regulating the third-party sale of pups and kittens in Northern Ireland. Any proposals that I am minded to introduce will be subject to public consultation. I am also keen to engage with the animal welfare sector, and I intend to facilitate discussions with key stakeholders in the time ahead as I determine the best course of action in implementing Lucy's law.

Ms Hunter: Minister, how does your Department monitor how well or not so well different council areas are looking into illegal breeding? I am aware that there is an animal rights abuse event next month in the Long Gallery. Will you attend that important event?

Mr Muir: On the second question, I am happy for you to send me through details of that. We will consider that based on diary availability.

On the first question, it is for councils in Northern Ireland to enforce that. If there are concerns around that, I am happy for the Member to write to me raising those concerns. We do seek to work in partnership with councils, and the importance of this area means that it is about working together.

I was in Larne last week to see the Paws for Thought initiative, which is essentially about tackling puppy smuggling. It is about seeing all those different bodies coming together to be able to deal with something that is insidious and wrong. That is why it is key that councils, HMRC, the police and my Department come together around the issues. Stakeholders, such

as animal welfare charities, have a crucial role to play. That is why I want to sit down with them to discuss the next steps in policy and legislation. I want to work with people on those issues to stamp out animal cruelty in Northern Ireland.

2.15 pm

Mr Donnelly: I am glad to hear that the Minister is out and about these days and has gone to Larne. That is great. Can I ask for a bit more detail on how puppy smuggling is being tackled?

Mr Muir: I enjoyed my day in Larne, and I was up in Glenarm as well. It is a great constituency to visit.

The Paws for Thought initiative is a key intervention, and we are all working together to tackle smuggling. I will highlight that, as part of that initiative, we will communicate with the general public to make them understand that they have a role to play in not being part of it and in being conscious that, when they buy pups and kittens, they are aware of where they came from and have assured themselves in that regard.

One last thing that I will say in response to the Member's question is that I want to bring in a good bit of legislation and policy around animal welfare so that we can tackle animal cruelty. Crucially, I will need resource and funding to do that, because it requires officials to consult and engage on legislation and to bring it to the Chamber. My Department's budget for next year will be absolutely crucial, because, if I do not get a settlement that is fair and just to allow me to do that, unfortunately, we will not be able to do the work that we need to do around tackling animal cruelty.

Lough Neagh Report and Action Plan: Update

4. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the implementation of the Lough Neagh report and action plan. (AQO 754/22-27)

Mr Muir: Following the Executive's approval of the Lough Neagh report and action plan on 18 July, the focus has turned to implementation of the actions. Good progress has been made on a number of the actions, including, for example, the development of a Lough Neagh science platform, the launch of two small business research initiatives and the implementation of

the inter-agency blue-green algae monitoring protocol. While the action plan offers a comprehensive approach, it acknowledges that achieving substantial recovery will take many years due to the complex nature of the issues at Lough Neagh. There is a significant amount of work to do, alongside our stakeholders, which will take both time and resources. I am firmly committed to ensuring the implementation of the action plan as swiftly as possible.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for his answer.*] One area of concern around the action plan is the fact that there was no funding support for fishermen who saw a drastic cut to their income last year and are probably facing an even more dire situation this year. Does the Minister have any plans to introduce emergency funding support for those who make a living on the lough?

Mr Muir: I will be meeting fishers from Lough Neagh tomorrow around that. I am very aware of the challenges around inland fisheries in Lough Neagh and the pressures that they have been under. I have engaged with officials. There are a number of issues arising from that, particularly around availability of funding and the recurrent nature of any support that will be required, but I have been exploring it with officials, and tomorrow, I will be engaging with people who are directly affected by it.

Mr Blair: The Minister might be aware that, yesterday, I asked a question to the First Minister and deputy First Minister in relation to Lough Neagh, on the closely related matter of the environmental improvement plan. I got a reply about Executive confidentiality, even though the matter that I referenced has been widely and publicly reported and referenced by the Office —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Is there a question?

Mr Blair: — for Environmental Protection. It relates directly to the question, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, which is this: can the Minister give us an update on Northern Ireland's first draft environment strategy and the environmental improvement plan?

Mr Muir: The environmental improvement plan will be Northern Ireland's first environment strategy. There was a legal obligation for that to be adopted in July 2023. After taking office in February, I brought that plan to the Executive in March, and I will continue to engage with Executive colleagues to secure its adoption.

Subsequent to my bringing the paper to the Executive in March, the Office for Environmental Protection commenced an investigation as a result of the failure to adopt the environmental improvement plan. Legal challenges have also been lodged with my Department around that. I will continue to engage with Executive colleagues in relation to it. It is relevant to Lough Neagh because the catchment area of Lough Neagh is substantial, and it is important that we take significant environmental action to address those issues. The environmental improvement plan is not just a statutory obligation; it is a tool to improve our environment.

Mr McGlone: Minister, what is the projected overall cost of the implementation of the Lough Neagh action plan, and, of that projected overall cost, how much has been assured to date?

Mr Muir: We are working through that with officials so that I can give you a correct answer. I have some estimates that I have worked out myself, but I want to engage with officials so that I can give you a substantial response. A significant range of actions need to be taken. The investment required in waste water infrastructure is significant, as are the interventions around agriculture. Some of that is mainstreamed as part of agricultural practice, so I want to make sure that I give you a correct figure. This year, I have essentially reallocated resources within my Department towards Lough Neagh and the interventions that are required. I will write to the Member with a full breakdown of the spend, but the cost of repairing and remedying the damage in Lough Neagh is way in excess of what it would have been if the situation had not been allowed to unfold in the first place.

Single-use Plastics Directive

5. **Mr Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when the single-use plastics directive will be transposed into domestic law. (AQO 755/22-27)

Mr Muir: I am committed to taking action to restrict the consumption of a range of single-use plastic products where sustainable alternatives are easily available and affordable. This includes transposing the single-use plastics directive. The primary objective of the single-use plastics directive is to protect our environment. Single-use plastic products are a wasteful use of resources, being used only once before being discarded and impacting on our marine and natural environment. The introduction of these regulations will reduce the

volume and impact of plastic products on our environment.

Officials are working to progress legislation that will introduce restrictions on the most commonly littered single-use plastic items, such as straws and cutlery. Single-use drinks containers must have a lid that remains attached, and other products containing plastic, such as sanitary and tobacco products, should have clear labelling of appropriate disposal. My officials will also progress a plan to reduce the consumption of single-use cups and food containers.

My Department is also taking a wide range of further actions to tackle the scourge of plastic pollution, including working to bring forward regulations to ban the sale and supply of single-use vapes and wet wipes containing plastic.

Mr Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for the very comprehensive answer.*] He mentioned legislation. Will that be primary legislation from Westminster, or is it secondary legislation?

Mr Muir: It is secondary legislation.

Ms Mulholland: Does the Minister intend to increase or introduce additional levies to target single-use plastics?

Mr Muir: My Department introduced new carrier bag legislation in April 2022, which increased the carrier bag levy charge from 5p to 25p and extended the scope to include all new carrier bags with a retail price of £5 or less. The primary objective remains to protect our environment by influencing consumer behaviour and promoting a significant reduction in the use of single-use plastic items. I will consider all options to find the most suitable way to help reduce the impact of single-use plastic items on our environment.

Mr O'Toole: I welcome the fact that this will be transposed, hopefully without much delay, into local law. On a related subject, has the Minister any plans to increase penalties for dog fouling? Particularly post-COVID, that has been an increased subject of interest in many local authorities.

Mr Muir: It is a bit of a pivot from single-use plastics [*Laughter*] but it is an important issue. One of the main issues for which Harvey Milk got elected as the first openly gay parliamentarian in America was dog fouling. All politics is local. I am happy to consider the issue if the Member writes to me. I have no

immediate plans for it, but if the Member articulates a strong case, I am prepared to give it a strong hearing.

Mobuoy Remediation Project: Update

6. **Mr Delargy** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the Mobuoy remediation project. (AQO 756/22-27)

Mr Muir: My Department is continuing to progress work in relation to monitoring the site, pursuing a criminal justice outcome against the former operators and determining the best approach for remediation through an industry standard process. A draft remediation strategy has been developed, in line with industry standards, for the long-term remediation of the Mobuoy site. My officials have published the Mobuoy Road remediation options appraisal report on the DAERA website in order to support the completion of the remediation strategy. As part of next steps, officials are working through an industry standard process, following land contamination risk-management guidance. That includes consultation with the public to seek their views on a draft remediation strategy for the Mobuoy site.

The size and complexity of the Mobuoy site mean that its remediation will not be a quick fix and will be subject to affordability considerations in the context of the constraints on public-sector finances. It is vital that all interested parties have the opportunity to comment on the draft strategy. There is no agreed preferred option, nor will there be until a consultation has been completed and responses carefully considered.

The NIEA continues to implement a comprehensive environmental monitoring programme at the site, and regular water quality reports are published, and therefore freely available, on the DAERA website. To date, I am advised that there has been no adverse impact on the safety of drinking water being supplied from the River Faughan.

Mr Delargy: Thank you, Minister, for your comprehensive answer. You have provided a lot of clarity on the details. We are all in agreement that this an ecological disaster and a complete national scandal, not just for Derry but right across Ireland, so I am glad to hear that your Department is working on it. Will you meet me, along with residents and environmental groups, as we are keen to campaign to make

sure that the truth is got to and that there is a resolution to the scandal?

Mr Muir: What occurred in the past at Mobuoy is a complete disgrace. Although I will continue to pursue the issue of the "polluter pays principle", what is happening is that the public sector and the people of Northern Ireland are having to pick up the tab for looking at remediation, and that is not lost on me. I am therefore happy to meet you and others, because I know that it is a key issue for not just the people of Derry/Londonderry but Northern Ireland more widely.

Mr Durkan: Given the eye-watering projected cost of clean-up, the current cross-cutting impasse over the completion of the A6 and the potentially catastrophic consequences for the environment and human health should the Mobuoy situation remain unresolved —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Is there a question?

Mr Durkan: — does the Minister agree that there should be a specific commitment in the Programme for Government to get the issue funded and sorted out once and for all?

Mr Muir: There is a commitment from me to address the issue within the financial resources that are available to me. That is the challenge, because, as the Member knows, the cost of remediation could be substantial. I am glad that the Programme for Government was launched for consultation yesterday, and I encourage all in the House and in Northern Ireland to give feedback on it. We also have to be realistic in the Programme for Government about what we can achieve in a reduced mandate, however. We lost two years of this mandate as a result of the House's not sitting, and we are now trying to play catch-up on the issues that need to be addressed, and Mobuoy is one of those issues.

Miss McAllister: I will pick up on the review of environmental crime fines and penalties, which the Minister mentioned in previous answers. Will the review cover waste crimes so that a similar scandal does not happen in future?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister, please answer quickly.

Mr Muir: The review and consultation on fines and penalties associated with environmental crime is really important. It will cover waste crime, because I am concerned about that. Officials are working on taking that forward, and

when we launch the consultation, I encourage everyone to respond to it.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call David Brooks. Be very quick, if you can.

Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011: Review

7. **Mr Brooks** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will commission a review of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. (AQO 757/22-27)

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: There is one minute left, Minister.

Mr Muir: The Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 is the foundation on which statutory bodies, including councils, the PSNI and my Department, carry out their duties to improve animal welfare. It is robust legislation that provides a range of powers for dealing with animal welfare cases, including being proactive in dealing with cases in order to prevent unnecessary suffering, and tough fines and penalties for serious animal welfare offences. The 2011 Act is on a par with animal welfare legislation in the rest of the UK.

Whilst I have no immediate plans to review the Act, I wish to engage with relevant stakeholders in the time ahead on future animal welfare policy and legislation. The suitability and capability of all legislation, including that Act, is something that I am willing to consider as and when evidence for change is presented as part of that stakeholder engagement.

2.30 pm

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: David, unfortunately, there is not time to ask a supplementary question, but you will get a response. That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move to 15 minutes of topical questions. Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Just Transition: Update

T1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the Department's just transition policy development. (AQT 501/22-27)

Mr Muir: There are a number of issues around that. We will start consultation soon on the regulations that will establish the just transition

commission. We will then make the regulations and establish the commission next year. That is important.

Another issue is the just transition fund for agriculture. As I outlined earlier in this Question Time, I have made the case to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs that there should be a separate and additional capital fund for Northern Ireland that would be the just transition fund for agriculture. That would be an invest-to-save measure, in that it would enable us not only to drive down greenhouse gas emissions but to deal with the air quality, ammonia and water quality issues that we have talked about today. A lot needs to be done in that space.

I will bring the draft green growth strategy to the Executive for endorsement very soon, and a just transition is a core part of that. I am keen that, as we travel the road to net zero, it is just and fair. It is absolutely key that we do that. That is where our economy needs to be as well when it comes to looking after the most vulnerable and ensuring equality.

Mr McGlone: Minister, you touched on something that inspired me to follow another line of thinking. On the just transition and the economy, what support or other measures have been discussed with the Department for the Economy, particularly the on-farm and in-yard measures that could be implemented to support that transition, especially with the disposal of slurry?

Mr Muir: I work closely with the Department for the Economy on the small business research initiative. I had a meeting with Conor Murphy yesterday. We work together closely in those areas and share a common desire to reach net zero in a just and fair manner. A good bit of that sits with me to take forward, and I will make announcements soon about phase 2 of the small business research initiative on the sustainable utilisation of slurry. We need to do a lot on water quality. A better way to manage slurry and manure is critical to that, and I will talk a lot about it over the rest of the mandate.

Just Transition Fund

T2. **Ms Á Murphy** asked the Minister whether, although he may have not seen a new EU report that notes that a temporary just transition fund should be established outside the common agricultural policy, he agrees that that could be a useful precedent for his engagements with the British Government. (AQT 502/22-27)

Mr Muir: I agree 100%, and that is what we need to do. I am passionate about a just transition in agriculture. We need to ensure that the work that we carry out to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and reach net zero will be fair and that we support people on that journey. That is why we need to provide those incentives and support. The developments that the Member mentioned will be useful in making the case to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I have made the case in writing, and I will make it in person next week.

Ms Á Murphy: I thank the Minister for his answer. The fact that the EU recognises the need for additional funding for this aspect indicates that it is not the purpose of the current agriculture budget, which currently goes to farmers: does the Minister agree?

Mr Muir: We have earmarked funding. The total earmarked funding, which includes agriculture and fisheries, is about £330 million, and that is largely resource funding. I am making the case that we should have separate capital funding. Also, I have made the case that the earmarked funding, which was guaranteed until the end of March 2025, following our departure from the EU, should be indexed in line with inflation going forward. It is critical that that happen.

I have a concern about that earmarked funding. The Member will have read media reports last week about the funding in DEFRA that is earmarked for England and the potential for that to be reduced. I am concerned about how that could affect Northern Ireland, and I will make strong representations to that effect. If we want to improve water and air quality and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, we need to fund and support agri-food to travel that journey, and that is absolutely key for me. I have engaged with my Scottish and Welsh counterparts on that recently, and I will engage with the Secretary of State on it in London next week.

Mental Health: Rural Areas

T3. **Mr Donnelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given that today is World Suicide Prevention Day and evidence suggests that people living in rural areas have higher rates of suicide and there are higher rates of suicide in rurally based occupations such as agriculture, to outline what initiatives have been undertaken to support and improve mental health for people living and working in rural areas. (AQT 503/22-27)

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his important question. The tackling rural poverty and social

isolation framework, otherwise known as the "TRPSI framework", has been in operation since 2016. It includes initiatives that address loneliness and improve physical and mental health and well-being. The farm families health checks programme, in conjunction with the Public Health Agency and the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, provides a comprehensive physical and mental health screening and advice service to farmers who visit livestock markets and rural people who attend a range of community events across Northern Ireland that the screening vehicle attends annually. Where necessary, referrals are then made to general practitioners or appropriate support services.

Further to that initiative, Rural Support, a charity that is also funded through the TRPSI programme, has commenced a go-to resource for farmers and their families in rural Northern Ireland when they have a personal and/or farm business-related crisis. Rural Support provides a range of programmes and services for farmers and farm family members in support of their farm business and personal well-being. Its objective is to reduce emotional distress and help alleviate poor mental health triggers, which it can measure through use of the well-established Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, with onward referrals being made to the appropriate support services as required.

My Department also has a long-standing funding relationship with the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster through which it promotes good health and well-being for young people in rural areas of Northern Ireland.

Finally, the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) provides a student support service that is accessible to all learners and includes a focus on health and well-being.

Mr Donnelly: Thank you for your answer, Minister. I am sure that the Minister will agree that the rates are far too high, even though the work is ongoing, and I am glad to hear that it is. Will he join me in encouraging people who are experiencing suicidal thoughts to reach out to someone, be it a GP, Lifeline or the Samaritans?

Mr Muir: I will. That is an important issue. Unfortunately, a number of my friends took their own lives. In some cases, that was due to societal attitudes in Northern Ireland towards LGBT people. It is important that we send out a message from this place that you are not alone and that you should reach out and speak to people to seek support.

TB Strategic Partnership Group: Strategic Investment Board Report

T4. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when he proposes to publish the Strategic Investment Board's report into the TB Strategic Partnership Group, which was commissioned well over a year ago. (AQT 504/22-27)

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. That report has been received, and I have read it. We have shared it with former members of the TB Eradication Partnership (TBEP), as far as I am aware. I will double-check whether they have received it. I am happy to share it with the AERA Committee, if that would be appropriate and people would be happy for me to share it in that way. I am happy for it to be shared.

Dr Aiken: The Minister will be aware of some of the changes in views on bovine TB that have been coming from DEFRA. Has the Minister been involved in any conversations on that? That is related to the answer that you just gave me on where we are with bovine TB. Will we adopt an approach similar to that adopted by DEFRA?

Mr Muir: The issue of bovine TB is serious and causes me concern, not primarily in a financial sense, although it is a real factor in the pressures on my Department. The concern that I have is about the mental health impact that it has on farmers. A TB breakdown has a significant impact on a family business, so we need to take action. I am meeting Minister McConalogue on Friday in Dublin to discuss what they are doing and what we are looking to undertake.

When the new Chief Veterinary Officer, Brian Dooher, took up office in April, I commissioned him to undertake a quick review of where we are on the issue. We are approaching a point in the next number of months, hopefully in October or November, where we will announce the way forward. I am cognisant of the developments that have taken place in England, and I will make announcements further to those.

Let me be clear in concluding: I take the issue very seriously. It is important that whatever we do not only is guided by evidence and science but takes into account the impact that it has on farmers across Northern Ireland.

Pollution: Slurry Run-off

T5. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his Department's assessment of the impact of slurry run-off into our waterways, rivers and Lough Neagh, considering the complex and competing issues and the seriousness of pollution. (AQT 505/22-27)

Mr Muir: We all know that water quality in Northern Ireland is a significant concern, and the Office for Environmental Protection has issued comments on that. There is an Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) report on water quality that I will share with the Member. Approximately a quarter of the issues related to poor water quality can be attributed to the waste water infrastructure; about 12% can be attributed to septic tanks; and 60-odd per cent can be attributed to agricultural run-off.

We are doing further research on the specific issues in Lough Neagh, but it is my understanding that a good element of that relates to diffuse pollution. We need to find ways to tackle that. That is why we are taking forward a measures on the management of slurry that will be consulted on as part of the nutrient action programme. We will announce some stuff in the time ahead on the sustainable utilisation of slurry. From engagement with the Ulster Farmers' Union and AFBI, I know that they are keen to see us roll that out at pace. That is one action that we are taking. The other action relates to low-emissions slurry spreading equipment (LESSE) and how we can incentivise its uptake. There are interventions that we can make.

I also understand the concerns about planning and ammonia. That is one of the issues about which farmers have been coming to me. They want to get better ways of managing it, so I have convened a ministerial round-table so that we can work through those issues.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his answer. I want to be practical. One of the issues affecting farmers is the inflexibility surrounding a slurry season that opens on 15 October and closes on 31 January. With very unpredictable weather, to put it mildly, in Northern Ireland, that is simply not realistic for many farmers. It puts them under huge pressure to get slurry out in what are sometimes very wet conditions rather than having some flexibility and better weather predictions and conditions on the ground. Will the Minister lobby on that and look into it as a genuine way of trying to reduce run-off into waterways and Lough Neagh?

Mr Muir: I am aware of the issues that the Member has outlined about the closed period. I will be honest with him: given the current situation with water quality in Northern Ireland, I cannot move towards changing that closed period and would not have credibility with others in society if I were to change it. However, I outlined the interventions to Members, and, if we are able to take action on the better management of slurry, options will be available to us. At the moment, I cannot look at changing that. I am being honest with you.

Dairy Farmers

T7. **Mr Brooks** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether, in view of recent statistics that show that the number of dairy farmers is in decline across the UK, as he will know, with 440 farmers exiting the industry in the year preceding April 2024, he will outline what steps he is taking to support local dairy farmers to remain profitable and in the industry. (AQT 507/22-27)

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. Often, in Northern Ireland, you are talking about family farms and businesses, and I take that seriously. That is why we are rolling out packages and measures in the future farm support programme. The focus of that is on building resilience in the industry, with the complete guiding aim of sustainable productivity, because that is where we are on that. We are engaging with people as we roll out those packages and measures, but, in my role as Minister, I am determined to deliver a strong future for agriculture in Northern Ireland. That means having a situation in which environmental and economic sustainability go hand in hand. It is critical that we get to that. Previous policy was about favouring intensification, but we are clearly focused on sustainable productivity now.

Mr Brooks: Will the Minister outline what avenues he is supporting to ensure that young people who want to seek a career as a primary producer have a pathway and support to get into the industry in that way?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister, you have less than a minute.

Mr Muir: This is one of the packages of measures that we are looking at as part of the future farm support development programme. We need to be able to encourage more people into the industry. My vision is that, in time, we will have a situation where more people want to

get into the industry than there is availability. There is one key issue around this, which is about land use and land use management. We want to be able to encourage people to pass land through the generations. That is something that we are going to explore in the time ahead.

2.45 pm

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. That ends Question Time and topical questions to the Minister.

We are going to return to the debate on budgetary pressures. We need to wait for the Minister of Finance. I ask Members to take their ease until the Minister arrives. OK, Nuala?

Private Members' Business

Budgetary Pressures

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly expresses its grave concern at the significant budgetary pressures facing the Executive; recognises the severe impact of these pressures on the delivery of, and investment in, public services, including policing and justice, health and social care, education, housing, infrastructure and our environment; notes that these pressures have arisen as a result of a failed policy of austerity at Westminster, financial mismanagement by the previous UK Government and underfunding of Northern Ireland below its level of relative need; agrees that, while the interim fiscal framework agreed with the UK Government was an important first step, the proposed 124% relative need factor does not adequately reflect policing and justice need in Northern Ireland and the disproportionate squeeze on the Justice budget; believes that a baselined fiscal floor set at a level greater than 124% should be delivered without further delay; calls on the Minister of Finance to publish the Executive sustainability plan, including steps to tackle the cost of division in society, which leaves the Executive with hundreds of millions of pounds less to invest in public services each year; and further calls on the UK Government to depart from their austerity policy by reviewing the fiscal rules and pursuing a progressive taxation system. — [Mr Tennyson.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after the first "relative need;" and insert:

"agrees that, while the interim fiscal framework agreed with the UK Government was an important first step, the proposed 124% relative need factor will, as things stand, only apply to future Barnett consequentials and cannot remedy the damage caused by core funding for Northern Ireland dropping below need, prior to the restoration of devolution in February 2024; stresses that this will have a significant, adverse and recurrent impact on the scale of the Northern Ireland block grant and therefore the delivery of vital front-line services; further notes that the proposed 124% relative need factor does not adequately reflect policing and justice need in Northern Ireland and the disproportionate squeeze on the Justice budget; believes that a baselined fiscal floor, set at a level greater than 124%, should be

delivered without further delay; calls on the Minister of Finance to publish the Executive sustainability plan, including steps to tackle inefficiencies and duplication, which leaves the Executive with less to invest in public services each year; and further calls on the UK Government to depart from their austerity policy by agreeing a new, long-term financial settlement with the Executive, reviewing the fiscal rules and pursuing a progressive taxation system." — [Ms Forsythe.]

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, everybody. As I was saying, Nuala, you are next up to make your winding-up speech on the motion, and you have 10 minutes.

Miss McAllister: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I am sure that everyone will be delighted to know that I will not take the whole 10 minutes.

I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate. It is important to highlight, first, that there is a recognition and consensus throughout the Chamber around moving forward and ensuring that we have the block grant that we deserve in Northern Ireland and which is overdue. It is important that we all get on the same page, and I thank everyone for contributing in such a way that we can build that consensus.

There have been a few recurring points and themes in the debate, and I want to touch on some of them before we close and move to the vote. To be perfectly clear and to reiterate what many people have said, it is Alliance's view, which is shared by many others, that austerity is not about saving money. It is not necessary, nor is it about being fiscally responsible. It is a damaging, poverty-inflicting political choice, and it is that policy that has resulted in the ever-increasing budgetary pressures that currently face the Executive.

We had hoped that, perhaps, the time had come for us to move beyond those austerity measures, but, unfortunately, as we have heard recently — the Minister highlighted it — through engagements with the UK Government and the removal of the winter fuel payment from a majority of pensioners in the UK, that is not to be the case with the new Government. Nevertheless, that does not mean that we, as an Assembly or an Executive, should give up. Instead, we need to ensure that we do not lose our course and that we add further fuel as we hold the Government's feet to the fire on those issues.

I want to touch on the issues of health and education. The majority of Members who contributed to the debate discussed health and education, and particularly around the issue of transformation. When discussing health in particular, every debate that we have mentions Bengoa and transformation. Unfortunately, many political parties simply pay lip service to that idea, and we are well beyond that time. We need to ensure that what we do is true transformation. It is about ensuring that we use our resources in the most cost-effective way to save lives. It is about early intervention and prevention before it is too late for many people.

In the discussion around education, we mentioned the £250,000 that is to be spent on electronic pouches for mobile phones. It is a pilot project, and surely that means that the Minister intends to roll it out to all schools at some point, wasting £25 million, in my calculation, so it is not about just £250,000. We need to get real when we talk about transformation and recognise that we need to put the money there to ensure that it is done for the long term.

There was a lot of discussion about working collaboratively across Departments to ensure that that happens. I touched on that in my speech yesterday regarding policing and its interdependence with Health. That is just one aspect, but this is across all Departments. We need to ensure that we work together so that money is not wasted or effort duplicated across Departments.

The issue of duplication brings me on to another issue that was mentioned, and that was the cost of division. I want to respond to the leader of the Opposition's comments that the cost of division is not in the Programme for Government. Surely the leader of the Opposition will recognise that that is a four-party Programme for Government. Also, the Opposition's plan for change did not reflect the cost of division, and it is an Opposition of just one party. We need to be realistic; we will not get everything that we need in the Programme for Government. However, our party is not a party of quitters, and we will consistently raise the issue of tackling the cost of division. It is important that we do so, it is financially responsible to do so, but we also owe it to the many people who see that division across society.

I thank the Minister, in particular, for coming to the Chamber, and I welcome the work that the Minister has been doing to ensure that engagement with the UK Treasury is ongoing. I think that the relationships there are becoming

more positive than they were with the previous Government, but I will highlight again some of the points that the Minister made, particularly on Departments living within their budgets.

Mr Carroll: I appreciate the Member giving way. I agree with her on the need to keep good pressure on the Treasury. Will she urge the Finance Minister to put pressure on the Irish Government, who have just come into £13 billion as a result of Apple's non-payment of tax? Does she think that that would go some way towards covering some of the gaps that we have in our public services?

Miss McAllister: I am sorry, I missed the end of your statement, but I agree that we have to work with the Republic of Ireland Government because it is important that we make sure that any money that is spent on a shared-island basis is spent cost-effectively.

I did not quite catch the end of your statement, but I will move on because I have a few points to answer. I hope that the Member does recognise that, when it comes to tackling the inefficiencies of our system, the reason that we do not have the budget settlement is about options; it is about how we can move forward, and the choices that we have in front of us.

I was going to move on to some of the Member's points around the fact that austerity has hurt people in Northern Ireland. I absolutely agree that it has hurt people in Northern Ireland. However, the reality is that Departments need to live within their budgets, otherwise, as the Minister said, we would be repaying the £550 million that the previous Government wrote off. Whilst we would like to step forward and say at every opportunity that we will not do x, y and z and we want to implement absolutely everything that is on every party's wish list, we simply cannot do that right now. Until we get that proper settlement from the UK Treasury and Government, we are going to be coming back to this, and that is why it is so important that we all speak from the same platform. We all need to ensure that we work collectively. Whether we are part of the Executive or not, the onus is on us all, because this is for every citizen of Northern Ireland. When everything has been cut time and again, you cannot keep making cuts when there is nothing left to cut.

I welcome the Minister's contribution to the debate. I also welcome the contributions of Members, and I highlight again that we will not support the amendment from the DUP because it removes the cost-of-division element. One Member mentioned the need for a baseline and

for it to be retrospective. We support that, but our issue is specifically around removing tackling the cost of division. We simply cannot do that. We in Alliance will always call for a shared future and for ensuring that there is that transformation in society, and one of those elements is tackling the cost of division.

Thank you, everyone, for contributing to the debate. I hope that we can continue to build consensus around ensuring that we have a fair and appropriate settlement for the entirety of Northern Ireland.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 50; Noes 24.

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Dr Archibald, Mr Baker, Mr Beattie, Mr Boylan, Mr Bradley, Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Crawford, Mrs Dillon, Mrs Dodds, Ms Dolan, Mr Dunne, Lord Elliott, Ms Ennis, Mrs Erskine, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Gaston, Mr Gildernew, Miss Hargey, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Kingston, Mr McAleer, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Miss McIlveen, Mr Martin, Mrs Mason, Ms Á Murphy, Mr O'Dowd, Mr Robinson, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Forsythe and Mr Frew

NOES

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Dickson, Mr Donnelly, Mr Durkan, Mrs Guy, Mr Honeyford, Ms Hunter, Mrs Long, Miss McAllister, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McMurray, Mr McNulty, Mr McReynolds, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Nicholl, Mr O'Toole, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Guy and Mr McMurray

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its grave concern at the significant budgetary pressures facing the Executive; recognises the severe impact of

these pressures on the delivery of, and investment in, public services, including policing and justice, health and social care, education, housing, infrastructure and our environment; notes that these pressures have arisen as a result of a failed policy of austerity at Westminster, financial mismanagement by the previous UK Government and underfunding of Northern Ireland below its level of relative need; agrees that, while the interim fiscal framework agreed with the UK Government was an important first step, the proposed 124% relative need factor will, as things stand, only apply to future Barnett consequentials and cannot remedy the damage caused by core funding for Northern Ireland dropping below need, prior to the restoration of devolution in February 2024; stresses that this will have a significant, adverse and recurrent impact on the scale of the Northern Ireland block grant and therefore the delivery of vital front-line services; further notes that the proposed 124% relative need factor does not adequately reflect policing and justice need in Northern Ireland and the disproportionate squeeze on the Justice budget; believes that a baselined fiscal floor, set at a level greater than 124%, should be delivered without further delay; calls on the Minister of Finance to publish the Executive sustainability plan, including steps to tackle inefficiencies and duplication, which leaves the Executive with less to invest in public services each year; and further calls on the UK Government to depart from their austerity policy by agreeing a new, long-term financial settlement with the Executive, reviewing the fiscal rules and pursuing a progressive taxation system.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease while we change personnel at the top Table.

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

Public Sector: Late Payments

Mr Frew: I beg to move

That this Assembly believes that businesses and traders who supply goods and services to the public sector should be paid on time and in full; recognises that late payments can negatively impact on cash flow and cause undue stress for business owners and their employees; notes with concern the findings of research published by the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) in 2023, which found that 56% of small business owners and the self-employed in Northern Ireland had experienced late payment in the past three months; further

notes that Northern Ireland was jointly the worst affected region; is concerned that the reasons for late public-sector payments generally remain unreported; highlights the need for enhanced reporting by all public bodies in order to improve accountability in this area; calls on the Minister of Finance to introduce a new Executive target for payment of at least 90% of invoices within five days for work completed; and further calls on the Minister to work with Executive colleagues to agree fresh measures to ensure 100% of valid invoices are paid within the 30 calendar day statutory limit.

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

Mr Frew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Local businesses play an integral role in the delivery of front-line public services in Northern Ireland through the provision of goods and services. They ought to be recognised and valued rather than exploited. Late payment has a serious impact on cash flow among businesses in Northern Ireland and disproportionately impacts on small and medium-sized firms. Coupled with high interest rates and the knock-on effect on loans and credit, as well as rising input costs, it is an inescapable fact that the failure to pay small businesses on time and in full puts many to the wall.

Previous research found that, compared with larger firms, twice as many small businesses have less than three months of cash reserves and therefore have less of a cushion to absorb disruption to cash flow. We know from research carried out by the Federation of Small Businesses and other organisations that close to a quarter of a million public-sector invoices were not paid within the legal requirement of 30 calendar days in 2021-22. That spans a variety of sectors and professions. We know, for instance, that barristers took industrial action last November because of delays in paying legal aid. That is just one example. When it comes to short-term experience of late payment among small business owners and the self-employed, Northern Ireland is jointly the worst affected region of the United Kingdom.

That is not a defensible or credible position. Increasingly, there is a concern that delays in

payment are being utilised as informal policy to ease cash flow problems in Departments and public bodies, given the perilous state of the public finances. Any such approach is totally and utterly unacceptable.

3.15 pm

Governments are not businesses. Sometimes I think that they would operate better as businesses, but they are crucifying our small businesses because they will not pay in time. It is not enough for Departments to publish the rate of late payments that are within their remit; we need to know the reasons for that so that future interventions to address the problem are informed, fair and effective. We need to dig deep into the psyche of our Departments. Resistance to addressing that challenge has far-reaching impacts that are well beyond the viability of individual businesses and the health and well-being of the traders that are impacted. A late payment culture has a negative impact on the willingness of local firms to engage in future tendering and procurement processes. That means that ratepayers potentially lose out on benefiting from the best possible bang for their buck and the most effective and efficient approach to a service. If we are serious about investing in public services that are fit for purpose, the Minister of Finance needs to deliver on the expectation of prompt payment. There should be a rapid review of current targets and reporting requirements in order to refresh the Executive's approach and ensure that there is a clear impetus for portraying more effective performance in that area. As part of that process, the DUP believes that the Department of Finance should engage intensively with the FSB to progress the recommendations in its 'Never Better Late' working paper.

The UK Government previously revised their prompt payment target for government buyers to 90% of undisputed and valid invoices from small and medium-sized enterprises within five days from the previous 10-day threshold. The Minister should look to replicate that step in Northern Ireland in order to instil confidence in the business community that the Executive are serious about increasing their ambition in that crucial area. I will go as far as saying that there should be legislative change to force Departments into a prompt payment process that is much more rigorous than that which the Departments have hitherto enjoyed.

I have working experience as an electrician in the construction industry, which is an industry that has been dogged by late payments. Some of the companies that I worked for no longer

exist because companies withheld payments. Cash flow is king. If you are sitting on reserves of only three months but have been awarded a massive contract, you think that you are getting bigger, but if that massive contract does not pay out in time, you are in trouble. For so many companies, the trend and practice is to say, "We will not grow. We will not get bigger. We will not go after those big contracts". That is because the dangers and risks that are associated with late payment for the bigger contracts are just too much. The companies just will not do it. A lot of our companies that could be thriving and striving stay small deliberately. That is the opposite of what the Government are trying to create. Is it not perverse that a Department in this place sponsors an organisation like Invest NI to create jobs while withholding payments to companies? If you say that you support business, you should do it. One small change in the way that we pay companies that provide a service could make all the difference before you even put any money into the budget line of Invest NI. Why are we not doing it? Why are we withholding payments? If we find that Departments are doing that to assuage the pressures on their budgetary requirements, that is really important, and we must get to the bottom of it. The Assembly must investigate it thoroughly to ensure that practices that should not happen do not happen, but I fear that they do. I fear that, somewhere along the line, Departments are withholding payments not because of testing work or whatever but because it is better to have the money sitting in their accounts or coffers for a wee while longer than it going out into the private sector. It is crucifying businesses. We are losing jobs and livelihoods. We are putting companies to the wall, not because of the volatile nature of business or the environment in which those people work, operate and sell but because government is destroying those businesses. I cannot tolerate that or abide that practice, if it is happening.

I come from the private sector and the real world. This place can have an impact on the real world. Will that impact be good or negative? Late payment to people who have provided a service is absolutely despicable, yet that is what we are experiencing. Why is that the case? I cannot think of a valid excuse for Departments not paying on time for work that has been completed. It does not make sense to me. My mind does not allow it to compute. Whilst I always say that the Governments should be more like business, I want to see them supporting business in that area. So far, the practices and legacy are shameful.

Mr Honeyford: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "Executive target" and insert:

", covering Departments, their agencies and arm's-length bodies, and local government, for payment of at least 90% of invoices within five days for work completed; and further calls on the Minister to work with Executive colleagues to agree fresh measures to ensure that 100% of valid invoices are paid within the 30 calendar day statutory limit, with the same prompt payment requirements for subcontractors and suppliers enshrined in the terms of all public-sector procurement."

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

Mr Honeyford: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I declare an interest that I am a member of the Federation of Small Businesses, which is in the Register of Members' Interests.

I do not often stand here and thank DUP Members for tabling a motion, but I thank Paul and Diane today. Paul said about people not engaging with the federation. It is a pity that they did not engage with it before tabling the motion, because we could have tightened it up to make it a little bit stronger.

I have been working on a private Member's Bill (PMB) about this issue for small businesses for quite some time. The debate is perfectly timed, because I am meeting the Minister tomorrow, and it is great to have the view of the House. I thank her for being here to listen to those views.

I want to quickly thank Neil from the Federation of Small Businesses for all the help and support that he has given me through his engagement and through bringing the evidence base to see what we can do in this place to get results. The federation has been brilliant about helping with that. Thank you.

Paul said that he has a background as an electrician. I come from a small business background. I am passionate about creating jobs and opportunities for our economy to grow and supporting our business community by creating the conditions and opening up opportunities to enable them to scale up and grow further. I am passionate about the issue that we are debating.

I started my first business when I was 20. Before I came to the Assembly, I loved the cut and thrust of small business, the people I met along the way and the thrill of working on a new contract, negotiating on price, whether or not you were winning or losing, and developing new ideas and products. The downside for every small business in Northern Ireland and elsewhere is cash flow and getting paid. I have been there, and I have lived it. Spending Monday morning checking the bank account to see what needs to be paid that week and what salaries have to go out that Friday is the routine of every small business in Northern Ireland. As your business grows, those numbers get greater, and so does the amount for which you have invoiced, the amount that you are waiting to get back and the amount of pressure on you. Quite often, people have signed indemnities on their houses and everything else to guarantee payments, and all that pressure mounts on people.

Most small businesses here do not have accounts departments, so, when you spend time in your working week trying to chase money backwards for work that is completed rather than looking forwards at work that you need to do, it is time wasted and stress caused. When it is coming from the public sector, it is so not necessary. Your headspace should be focused on growing and developing the business, getting new business and increasing jobs in our society, not being distracted by the pressure of cash flow. Simply, the public sector should not be adding to that burden. When money is there, is allocated and is waiting to be paid, and when the job is completed, the public sector should be helping business with cash flow by paying it quickly.

It is our role in the Assembly to set the scene, to create the pitch for others to play or to be the gardener who creates the conditions. A gardener does not actually grow the plants, but they remove the weeds, tend the soil and fertilise and water the plants. The better the conditions and the better the conditions that are created, the better the plants grow all by themselves. That analogy is what I want to use for what we should be doing for our economy here and with this issue of prompt payment.

A self-employed small business owner will grow their own business all by themselves, but it is our role to create the very best conditions to help them, to give them the best opportunities and to give advantage to local companies and the people who work here. The Alliance Party will always prioritise growing our economy, creating new green jobs and creating skills and export opportunities and the benefits that flow

from that. However, every business can be stretched with its cash flow. When payment of invoices is delayed or slow to come in, you struggle to pay out your own invoices and accounts to the other side. Again, the public sector should not be adding to that problem. We can help business by providing a positive cash flow position.

The amendment is to strengthen and widen the motion to reflect what is actually happening and the problem that is out there. This has to include all the public sector. It has to include local government and the arm's-length bodies such as the Education Authority and the Housing Executive, to name just two. There are three areas that I am looking to cover in my PMB that aim to transform the situation. First, it is absolutely vital that all procurement contracts include in the terms and conditions down the supply chain not just the main supplier of the tender but its subcontractors. A company that wins a government contract should be paid quickly, but also the terms of awarding that contract should include in the procurement contract that the main contractor must pay its subcontractors within the same terms and conditions. That condition is legislated for in the UK Procurement Act 2023, but we are not seeing that borne out in practice. The days of the main contractor in government contracts getting paid within 30 days or less but taking 90 days or 120 days to pay the people who supply the work have to end.

I will give an example. I spoke with this person this morning to follow up with them on what I was going to say here. Last summer, I dealt with a constituent of mine who owns a small business, working for the Housing Executive. He has six employees. The main contractor that held the Housing Executive contract was getting paid quickly, within the 30-day period, but my constituent was waiting 90 days to be paid. Basically, the main contractor was cash-flowing his business at the expense of the very people who were doing the work. When the main contractor went into administration, my constituent carried the can for four months of work that was not paid for. He is not alone in that, and that has been repeated, specifically with Housing Executive contracts, over a period of time. That brings job insecurity to local people who are getting up every morning and working hard, and it brings heartache and worry to small business owners. Ultimately, that guy lost his business. This has got to stop.

How many large contractors working on government contracts have done just that and taken the self-employed and the little guy out?

3.30 pm

I will just note two other items in my PMB that I did not add to the amendment but want to reference. As I said, public-sector invoices are paid in a legal time frame of 30 calendar days, but, if public-sector invoices are not paid within the legal time frame of 30 calendar days and there is no dispute on the invoice raised, interest payments are automatically applied. The Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998 allows suppliers to add interest. In practice, that never happens. There is concern about losing further orders. Once you are in and you work for one month, then it is two months, and then it is three months, and you have paid your staff, your vehicle costs, your insurance and your suppliers. Small businesses become completely dependent on the main contractor, and they are completely trapped by what the main contractor does. That has to end. I want to look at swapping that around and making the interest payment compulsory for the public sector, so that it would automatically be paid with a late payment if the payment was delayed. That would stop it happening again. The invoice would be paid with interest if the delay was the fault of the public sector.

The final point is for public sector prompt payment data to be properly recorded and published. If those three points were implemented, you would start to solve the issue, and payments would flow to our small businesses. I trust that everybody will support the motion and the amendment, which, I trust Members will agree, strengthens it.

Miss Hargey: I am also pleased to speak on the motion. It is vital that our businesses and traders are paid promptly and in full when working with the public and private sectors. Government has a duty to set an example to all industries by ensuring that invoices are paid as soon as possible. The prompt payment of invoices is particularly important when working with small businesses in order to ensure that they can maintain their proper cash flow and, importantly, pay their employees and suppliers. The previous Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, provided an important intervention in that regard when, during COVID, he instructed all Departments to continue paying suppliers who provide goods and services for which the demand had been reduced or paused temporarily.

Our small businesses are the backbone of our economy, crucially, along with the role of labour and, importantly, our workers. Proper and prompt payment is the least that they should

expect for the services that they provide. Minister Caoimhe Archibald has been working closely with the Federation of Small Businesses to ensure that that is the case. Indeed, the federation has been quick to thank the Minister and her officials for the work that she has done on the issue.

While there is always room for improvement, it is worth noting that the Executive Departments are largely meeting their payment time frames, and payments are being made much more quickly, when compared with those coming from trusts, arm's-length bodies, councils or other agencies. Indeed, central government is performing well in paying invoices on time. We need to focus on areas of improvement, but let us not forget the contribution that those services and procurements make to society, our economy and those small businesses.

Annually, we procure over £3 billion in local services. While that money is going directly into those businesses to the supply chains, importantly, it is recruiting workers to our workforce as well. That adds to infrastructure, training and investment. Importantly, if we can do more to align that to social value, what role can the bedrock of our economy play in doing more to lift up all people in our economy? We should not forget that the economy should work for the people, rather than people working for the economy. That does not mean that we should be complacent. Setting targets can only increase accountability and act as a signal for other industries that they should do the same.

I commend the Minister for the work that she has been doing so far and the engagement that she has been having with key stakeholders, particularly those relating to our small businesses. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): This is Colin Crawford's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, so I remind the House that it is convention that a maiden speech be made without interruption.

Mr Crawford: As I give my maiden speech today, I do so with a mixture of excitement, fear and humility, as well as knocking knees and shaky hands.

First, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Mr Robin Swann MP. From being elected to this place in May 2011, Robin served the constituents of North Antrim consistently and with steadfast determination and loyalty. There is no doubt that I have big shoes to fill, or not so big. I wish Robin well as he takes up his new role in Westminster and wish him, his wife and his two

kids God's richest and warmest blessings for the future.

Over the past few weeks, there have been many reports and much speculation about the new Ulster Unionist MLA for North Antrim. For those who do not know me, my name is Colin Crawford. I am a proud Ballymena man through and through. I was born and raised in Harryville and want to make special mention of my two amazing parents, parents who have made countless sacrifices along the way to help shape the man I am today. I publicly thank my mum and dad, family and friends for all their continued encouragement and support, particularly over recent weeks.

Before coming to Stormont, I worked for Northern Ireland's foremost bus builder, Wrightbus. Prior to that, I worked for Firmus Energy, and I bring with me real-life experience of the voluntary and community sector. Although I am only 39 years old — I kid you not — and some may think me inexperienced, I assure the amazing constituents of North Antrim that I am 100% focused on and dedicated to representing them as their Ulster Unionist MLA, and I look forward to meeting as many of them as possible over the weeks and months to come.

Small to medium-sized enterprises are crucial to the Northern Ireland economy, they play a vital role in the supply chain of large manufacturers such as Wrightbus and are crucial to our voluntary and community sector. Late payment of invoices is a major source of unnecessary stress for those trying to operate such businesses. Late payment often causes a ripple effect down the supply chain, amplifying the problem. The Ulster Unionist Party, as per its local government manifesto in 2023, committed to acting to ensure that public-sector organisations such as schools, hospitals and Departments paid their bills promptly in order to alleviate such stress. We must say clearly to government suppliers that they must pay their supply chain on time or face losing future government contracts. It is only right that we say to the public sector that it must lead by example and make sure that suppliers are paid on time. The difference between waiting 60 days and waiting 90 days can make or break many small companies, so it is vital that the private and public sectors work better in that regard.

I am pleased to support the motion on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Thank you for your maiden speech, Colin.

Ms McLaughlin: I add my congratulations to you, Mr Crawford, on making your maiden speech in the House. We will hopefully hear from you many more times during the mandate.

The issue of late payments to small businesses is important. It has been said many times that our small businesses are the lifeblood of our economy and the backbone of our high streets. In Derry and across the North, small businesses generate wealth. They keep our towns and cities moving by providing crucial employment and opportunities and driving economic progress.

We are a small business economy, and today is a chance to reaffirm that. Those businesses have faced enormous challenges in the past few years. From the uncertainty of Brexit to the shock of COVID and the cost-of-doing-business crisis, they have weathered the perfect storm in recent years. We also know that businesses, in the midst of all those challenges, face issues that have gone unaddressed for far too long, including late payments. The Federation of Small Businesses has outlined the scale of that challenge in recent years, and Neil and his team have told us about small businesses that have been impacted by late payments: businesses that have run into cash flow difficulties; businesses that have been pushed into taking on debt; and businesses that have been put out of business altogether. I am familiar with all those issues.

As a previous CEO of the Chamber of Commerce in Derry, I positively campaigned to support good payment practices from business to business and to highlight the importance of responsible and sustainable payment practices in the public sector. Unfortunately, we have never been able to achieve the ambition of eradicating late payments. I have seen first-hand the huge toll of late payments on those who run small businesses from the impact of significant stress and worry about loss of livelihoods. It is not just a pressing issue for the economy but a real mental health challenge for dedicated entrepreneurs who should be able to focus on running their businesses free from that stress. It literally keeps people awake at night and overcomes them, not allowing them to be innovative and creative in their business, because they are consumed by where their payments are coming from.

The problem is by no means unique to Northern Ireland, but we should be absolutely clear that there is no excuse for the scale of late

payments that we see in our economy. As the FSB has argued, while it may be more difficult to solve the issue in the private sector, it is totally unacceptable for government to pay so late. From Departments to health and social care trusts and, indeed, councils, throughout public service, there is simply too much evidence of payments not being made on time. Other Members have outlined the scale and depth of the impact of that. In 2021-22, almost a quarter of a million invoices were not paid on time, inside the public-sector legal requirement of 30 days. While specific data for Northern Ireland is limited, data from across the UK suggests that the entire economy could be boosted by about £2.5 billion every year if small businesses were promptly paid.

I hope that the Executive can, at long last, tackle the challenge for the benefit of our small businesses and, indeed, the economy. I would fully support the Executive's introducing legislation at the earliest opportunity, and I would be supportive of a private Member's Bill as outlined by David Honeyford. We need to support our small businesses on the issue, and, like many others, I call on the Executive to do so. I would also like to see public bodies produce plans on how they will meet the legal obligations placed on them. That is the very least that we can do and that businesses deserve. Today is a chance for us to make that case and call on the Executive to make the changes that are needed.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to colleagues for tabling the motion. I declare that I have an immediate family member who works in the legal profession.

I will bring forward a matter relating to the topic that has been raised with members of the Justice Committee. As part of our induction into all things justice, the Committee heard from directorates in the Department and various stakeholders from the justice family. In the course of those sessions, we heard evidence from the Law Society and the Bar Council, which stated that the Department takes between 12 and 16 weeks to make legal aid payments for work that has been completed.

Evidence from the Department naturally outlined the existing financial pressures. As part of the discussion on the legal aid issue, officials indicated that the time frame was necessary and, indeed, was being used as a budget management tool. In briefings prior to the restoration of the Assembly, justice spokespersons were advised that, at various times, the Department was having to eye a six-month time frame for payments, again as a

result of demand and pressures and for the purposes of managing the budget.

3.45 pm

The Law Society and the Bar Council were very clear about the impact of such delayed payments. The Law Society cited that it can have massive consequences for cash flow, particularly for small businesses, which most solicitors' firms are. Such delays can literally be the difference between firms remaining open or having to close their doors, resulting in unemployment in local areas and further vacant premises on our high streets. That is not just a city problem: it is widely felt in rural communities. Likewise, the evidence that we received from the Bar Council indicated that delays in payment had resulted in numerous barristers leaving the profession entirely, particularly younger women.

The problem is compounded because payment rates for work have not been reviewed for decades. As a result of that area of law being so unprofitable, many firms no longer do legal aid work at all. Hence, very few students wish to enter the area of legal aid law because it is not well paid and the hours are extremely antisocial. Moreover, even when there are willing students, most firms do not have the resources to take on apprentices from the Institute of Professional Legal Studies because they cannot afford to pay them. Unless people have a placement, they are not accepted into the Institute. Thus, the future of legal aid representation in Northern Ireland, in the long term, hangs in the balance.

Traditionally, the House has not had much sympathy for the profession or some of the expenditure on legal aid. Some of that criticism is justified but not all of it. We ought not to forget the bigger picture: it is an access to justice issue. Closed doors on legal aid firms mean that it is all the more difficult for the public — our constituents — to access justice. Remember that our constituents are the people who avail themselves of those services, and those who are in receipt of legal aid are entitled to it. Every facet of their lives is inspected before approval is granted because it is means-tested, and even those thresholds have not kept pace with wages, thus excluding many who work but are still on the breadline. Considerable resources are brought to bear to secure prosecutions, but the fundamental tenet of justice is that everybody is entitled to legal representation and a defence where applicable. We are sleepwalking our way into a position where people will no longer be able to access help by way of legal representation.

Delayed payments are not the totality of the problem for the legal profession, but they certainly have serious outcomes and can make a bad situation infinitely worse. The issue for the House is that it is not just about the odd legal firm disappearing. From the Department's perspective, the delays are used as a management tool to assist with budgeting, but the result is jeopardy for others. Twelve weeks is inordinate, and, given the delays in the system, the payment is often for work that was undertaken up to a year previous. In no other sector would that be acceptable, but then lawyers are just above politicians on the popularity scale.

The consequences are not just for lawyers, they are for our justice system in Northern Ireland and the fundamental principles of access to justice and the right to legal representation. The sector will, doubtless, appreciate the motion, but in the grand scheme, so should we all.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Minister, I call on you to respond. You have 15 minutes.

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.]* I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion as it shines a light on an incredibly important matter. Small and microbusinesses, as many Members have reflected, are the heart of our local economy. It is, therefore, incumbent on all of us to do what we can to support those businesses. I also fully recognise the difficulties that are caused by delays in promptly paying suppliers, particularly for small businesses and microbusinesses that play an important part in supporting the local economy. Many small businesses, as has been reflected, have a limited cash flow, and undue delays in paying invoices can have a devastating impact on the survival of those businesses and their employees. I am pleased to confirm that the current public contract regulations, which apply to all public bodies here, including councils, already require that payments to contractors be made no later than 30 days from receipt of a valid undisputed invoice. Those regulations also require contractors to pay their subcontractors within 30 days and that those requirements be in all further subcontracts in the supply chain. The new procurement regulations, which are due to come into force shortly, also incorporate those requirements.

The Executive have a prompt payment target whereby Departments aim to pay valid and undisputed invoices within 10 days of receipt and no later than 30 days. I encourage all

Ministers to require their non-departmental public bodies to implement that policy. I add that, while the Executive have no authority over councils, I encourage the Minister for Communities to work with council networks to improve the payment practices in that area, given the number of microbusinesses that provide goods and services to councils.

Where my Department's responsibilities are concerned, the Finance Shared Services provide transactional processing and reporting, including making payments to suppliers on behalf of central government. In the previous financial year, the Finance Shared Services processed over 807,000 payments totalling approximately £4 billion. During that year, 91% of valid invoices were paid within 10 days of receipt and 97% of valid invoices were paid within 30 days. That strong record of prompt payment has been maintained throughout this year, and I am committed to ensuring that central government leads by example and continues to drive up performance.

Unfortunately, the level of performance across the public sector varies greatly, with a number of areas requiring immediate attention to improve their performance. I strongly urge all public- and private-sector organisations to adhere to that best practice and, where their performance falls short, to take immediate action to make the necessary improvements.

I am meeting the local government partnership panel next week and have already requested that prompt payment performance be a key matter for discussion. In addition, my officials have been engaging with the Federation of Small Businesses to share learning and discuss prompt payment performance and reporting. I will meet the federation tomorrow, as Mr Honeyford mentioned, to discuss how best we drive up performance and improve reporting across the public sector.

It is important that there is transparency around prompt payment performance and reporting on the reasons for delay. The motion references:

"56% of small business owners and the self-employed ... had experienced late payment in the past three months".

The data supporting that does not relate exclusively to the public sector, and I urge all private-sector businesses to also promptly pay their suppliers, particularly those that are in their supply chains. I suggest that resources be concentrated on improving the current 10-day target, with the aim of moving to a five-day

target when that has been achieved, depending on transaction and resource implications.

I also call on all sectors, public and private, to recognise the challenges that businesses face and the importance of cash flow to them and their employees and to immediately address any shortfall in the prompt payment to their suppliers. I strongly believe that payment performance in the public sector will improve only if we strengthen the monitoring of prompt payment targets. I plan to bring a refreshed public procurement policy statement to the Executive that will include a requirement for public bodies to report on their prompt payment performance. That additional transparency will improve accountability and maintain the appropriate level of scrutiny and focus on this important matter.

In my role as Finance Minister, I will continue to advocate for the prompt payment of our small and medium-sized enterprises for the goods and services that they provide and for central government to lead by example.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Thank you very much indeed, Minister. I call now on Kate Nicholl. You have five minutes.

Ms Nicholl: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I start by congratulating the new Member for North Antrim for an excellent maiden speech. I look forward to further contributions.

My job is to make a winding-up speech for the Alliance amendment to the motion on late payments in the public sector. We know that cash flow is crucial for the survival of small and medium-sized businesses, but it is also really important for growth, allowing businesses to reinvest into their businesses and make an even bigger contribution to the economy as a whole.

In March 2023, 89% of businesses in Northern Ireland were microbusinesses with fewer than 10 employees, and just over 2% of businesses had 50 or more employees, and four in 10 businesses had a turnover of less than £100,000 while just over one in 10 had a turnover in excess of £1 million. Given that micro and small businesses are the backbone of our economy, as Deirdre said, they also hold the key to growing our economy — something that we need in order to deliver greater prosperity for all our people.

We know that public-sector bodies procure only when the funding is in place, so it is fair to assume that the issue with late payments is largely administrative. FSB research found that,

in 2021-22, more than 234,000 invoices were not paid within the public-sector legal requirement of 30 calendar days. That is particularly frustrating for businesses that will tell you of the impact that late payments have on their ability to trade and their confidence in engaging in public procurement and, in more extreme cases, of how it can lead to insolvency and impact on their mental health. All will say that it results in wasted time and constrained growth. Therefore, given the importance of business to our economy, and given the impact that prompt payment can have in supporting local businesses and their ability to grow, it is regrettable that more focus has not been put on the issue. That is why my colleague David Honeyford has private Member's legislation in development on this. Money owed by public bodies to businesses within our economy should be going back into the economy as quickly as possible, not resting in government accounts.

There is also an issue around the inconsistency of payment data in the public sector. Sometimes it is unavailable, despite requirements to publish and explain performance. David mentioned that as well. Without data, we cannot understand more about why and how late payments from the public sector are occurring. That data could also tell us more about payment practices through the supply chain, which is, as he highlighted, also an issue.

We all agree that the current statistics are unsustainable. We agree that more needs to be done. The Alliance amendment intends to strengthen and widen the motion to include other Departments, arm's-length bodies and agencies. It provides a target:

"for payment of at least 90% of invoices within five days for work completed",

and calls on Ministers to work together:

"to agree fresh measures to ensure that 100% of valid invoices are paid within the 30 calendar day statutory limit, with the same prompt payment requirements for subcontractors and suppliers enshrined in the terms of all public-sector procurement."

I welcome the Minister's comments and the fact that her Department is taking this so seriously.

Running a business is stressful at the best of times. I loved David's analogy on growth and creating the conditions. That was very powerful. Government and other public bodies should be supporting businesses to ease those stresses,

not exacerbating them with late payments. I hope that Members will support our amendment and support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): I call Diana Armstrong. *[Laughter.]* Sorry, I call Diane Forsythe. Diane, you have 10 minutes.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank everyone who contributed today, and I echo all the points that were made at the beginning by my colleague Paul Frew.

As an accountant who has worked across the private sector and the voluntary and community sector, I have lived and breathed the impact of this issue. I am acutely aware of the extreme pressures that the late payment of invoices has on operational cash flow. It is bad enough when that is within the private sector, but when it is government that is late paying invoices to our small and microbusinesses, it is absolutely unacceptable.

To put it further into context — this has not been widely spoken about today — it is generally standard practice in government-awarded contracts to the private sector that the service provider will be out of pocket for the cost of its staff salaries and supplies in order to deliver the work under the contracts, and it will invoice in arrears after a number of months to receive the money back. Therefore businesses are already well out of pocket by maybe tens and hundreds of thousands of pounds before the invoice is issued for government to pay them. That already pushes many small and microbusinesses out of the market, as they do not have the reserves or overdraft facility to allow them to bid for the work. When the businesses are significantly out of pocket and invoice, they then have to wait a further 30 days for a target payment by government. That puts even more pressure on them. Following that, for government to miss the 30-day target is horrific for the businesses, especially when it is often only on a technicality. That is putting people out of business. The reputation of government in paying that way spreads, and many small businesses and voluntary and community sector organisations stay away from bidding for those contracts because they have seen what happened to others.

The consequence for our government procurement system is that with fewer competitors able to bid for those contracts, we see less value for money in the awards. That is unacceptable, and we need to see an end to that culture and appreciate the impact that it has.

4.00 pm

We support the amendment, as we want to see all public-sector bodies taking this approach, although we recognise the problem that the Finance Minister faces with regard to control over local government. Nevertheless, we appreciate her commitment on the issue.

I thank David Honeyford for his contribution, and we look forward to his private Member's Bill on the topic. Deirdre Hargey welcomed the Finance Minister's work to date with the FSB, and I echo those thanks. It is good to see our Finance Minister's commitment on the matter. I congratulate Colin Crawford on his maiden speech and welcome him to the Chamber: it is great to see him here. He spoke about the ripple effect of late payment on other bodies and companies and how the public sector should lead by example.

Sinéad McLaughlin spoke strongly about how we should take today as a chance to reaffirm that Northern Ireland is a small-business economy and do what we can to emphasise and support that. My colleague Joanne Bunting raised the specific issue of legal aid, which is important, and highlighted evidence that was given to the Justice Committee. It shocked me to know the detail of some of that: taking 12 to 16 weeks to make legal aid payments for services provided a year prior is just unacceptable. The evidence from the Law Society and the Bar Council saying how that was putting people out of business and costing Northern Ireland the provision of legal aid and putting our justice system at risk really brings to light the wider impact of this situation.

I thank our Finance Minister for coming to respond to the debate. I welcome her commitment across the issue, and I look forward to seeing the new procurement regulations coming through the Finance Committee. Again, I am grateful to see her engagement with the FSB on the issue.

I reiterate the point that I made with regard to the shared service data. The percentages that are being paid within targets look relatively high, but what is not captured are the businesses that are not doing business with the public sector because they have either been priced out or do not have capacity or they have had a loss of confidence as a result of late payment for their services and do not engage currently.

We believe that government bodies should pay their invoices on time and in full, if not early, where possible. We support the Minister in any

action that she will take to move this forward. Let us be professional, ambitious and prudent. Let us support our local businesses and their employees by agreeing the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Thank you, Diane. I apologise for getting your name wrong: it is not like me.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly believes that businesses and traders who supply goods and services to the public sector should be paid on time and in full; recognises that late payments can negatively impact on cash flow and cause undue stress for business owners and their employees; notes with concern the findings of research published by the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) in 2023, which found that 56% of small business owners and the self-employed in Northern Ireland had experienced late payment in the past three months; further notes that Northern Ireland was jointly the worst affected region; is concerned that the reasons for late public-sector payments generally remain unreported; highlights the need for enhanced reporting by all public bodies in order to improve accountability in this area; calls on the Minister of Finance to introduce a new Executive target, covering Departments, their agencies and arm's-length bodies, and local government, for payment of at least 90% of invoices within five days for work completed; and further calls on the Minister to work with Executive colleagues to agree fresh measures to ensure that 100% of valid invoices are paid within the 30 calendar day statutory limit, with the same prompt payment requirements for subcontractors and suppliers enshrined in the terms of all public-sector procurement.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

GP Services in Fermanagh

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): In conjunction with the Business Committee, I have given leave to Áine Murphy to raise the matter of access to rural GP services in Fermanagh.

I ask Members to either vacate the Chamber or take your seats, please. I call Áine Murphy, who has up to 15 minutes.

Ms Á Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle [*Translation: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker*], and go raibh maith agat [*Translation: thank you*] to the Minister for coming to the Chamber to take part in the debate. I raise an issue that has become one of the most important in my community in recent years and months. As we are all acutely aware, GP access in Fermanagh has become very difficult. Many practices in the North are at breaking point. However, the state of GP practice capacity, especially in rural Fermanagh, is at crisis point.

My GP practice, Lisnaskea medical centre, has approximately 14,000 patients, which makes it one of the largest practices in the North. The issues faced by the practice are well rehearsed and resulted in a contract hand-back in 2022. The lack of GP provision, coupled with increased patient lists, has resulted in demand outstripping supply in relation to GP appointments. The lack of appointments has led to patients and staff becoming increasingly frustrated. Patient and staff frustrations have only continued to grow, and a meaningful intervention to assist them with the difficulties that they experience is required without delay. The patients and staff of Lisnaskea medical centre deserve better than that, and so do patients in any rural practice.

Patients deserve a service that means that they can get a GP appointment when they need one. Staff deserve an adequate plan to stabilise GP services and, most importantly, to protect them into the long term. Primary care needs to be supported, and direct intervention is required. The over-reliance on locum doctors and temporary staff must change. A plan to properly address the specific issues that rural practices face, such as the recruitment and retention of

staff, as well as multidisciplinary team (MDT) roll-outs, can act as a foundation to relieve some pressure in the primary care sector.

Cheann Comhairle [*Translation: Mr Speaker*], if you would indulge me, as I am aware that this is not Question Time, I should like to ask the Minister for an update on the long-awaited new build for the Lisnaskea health centre, because I have submitted questions over the past few months and years on that. Is the Minister willing to meet me to discuss specific issues around GP provision in south Fermanagh?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): I gave that indulgence to talk to the Health Minister, but he is a very approachable person. You can talk to him fairly normally most of the time.

I call Deborah Erskine, who has up to seven minutes.

Mrs Erskine: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Áine Murphy, my constituency colleague, for securing the Adjournment debate, which is vital for our rural area.

Pressures in our GP services are nothing new. For at least a decade, we have been warned of the consequences of underfunding in primary care. In the west, we have unique challenges in attracting the GP workforce. Our constituency is one of the most beautiful in the UK. We are proud of our area, yet it is a rural area and there are challenges to overcome. We need to do more to promote our constituency as a place to live and work. We also need to support the GP workforce that has remained in the area. Recruitment and retention are two sides of the same coin. In the past, I have asked Health Ministers whether they were minded to implement measures that might incentivise GPs to live and work in rural areas. It has been done elsewhere. The Member for South Down was on the Health Committee when we discussed initiatives like that. It could be a measure to address some of the issues in rural areas across Northern Ireland.

In the summer, we heard that there were difficulties in accessing locums to keep services going. There is no disputing that, as local representatives, we hear week in and week out of the challenges that people have in accessing GP surgery appointments. Recent findings from the NI Audit Office reveal concerning trends. Almost one in three local GP practices has sought crisis support in the past four years. That is an alarming statistic that underscores the urgent need for action. We cannot afford to

overlook the challenges facing the primary care workforce.

Consider that in the context of Lisnaskea health centre, which my colleague referenced. Recently, as the Minister will be aware, posters were put up outside it. What was achieved by doing that? Frankly, all that it did was demoralise and hurt the staff who work there. They are trying to do their best in difficult circumstances and, as was referenced, in a building that is crumbling around them. I also ask the Minister to give us an update on the medical centre, because it will be a welcome addition to our constituency and to health provision in my area. My hope is that we can develop multidisciplinary teams and aid service provision in one of the most service-starved parts of our constituency.

MLAs in our area face a situation in which we have a GP workforce that is retiring, with little sign of anyone coming forward to take on the mantle in GP practices. I pay tribute to practices in our area and thank them for the work that they do alongside the excellent community pharmacy provision. My practice at Brookeborough and Tempo Primary Care Services was one of 13 practices that had to hand back its contract in 2022-23. The Western Trust stepped in to provide a service for 8,000 patients who were on the books, but the trust's stepping in is an unsustainable situation. In the spring, we heard that the Minister had come to an agreement with GPs on new contractual arrangements. Has that made a difference to GPs coming to Fermanagh and South Tyrone and entering practice in areas?

I come to another question, Minister. It concerns a common complaint that MLAs receive, and it is not unique to Fermanagh and South Tyrone. In 2022, the then Health Minister announced that £1.7 million was to be invested in telephone services. I have asked several times where that money has gone and for a breakdown of the surgeries that received money for those services, but, as yet, I have not had an answer. Perhaps we need more accountability around where money is directed in the system. I ask about that because practices have closed in Fermanagh and South Tyrone or have been amalgamated, and that places a burden on practices, with increased calls to the surgery. We need infrastructure in place to cope with the demand. As I mentioned, we need to see MDT development in the south-west federation area. When services transform and are reshaped in our area, access to services at the first port of call — our primary care settings — will be truly transformative.

That brings me on to a developing situation, which is not in Fermanagh but in south Tyrone. I refer to the Moy GP practice. MLAs in the Chamber will have received correspondence on the issue last week. We were informed that the district nursing team would be relocated to the South Tyrone Hospital in Dungannon without any planned warning having been given to the practice. GP practices such as the Moy practice rely on the district nursing team to support the most vulnerable members of the community. Those nurses are on-site in a more immediate way in our practices, so I would like to understand from the Minister whether that is part of a wider reshaping of district nursing teams across the trust areas or, indeed, whether it is unique to the Southern Trust area.

The problems will not be addressed overnight: I get that. The importance, however, of delivering real change cannot be overstated. I therefore impress on the Minister the need to address the specific concerns in the rural area of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. That should include innovative ways to address the difficulties with GP services in our constituency.

Ms Dolan: I thank my party colleague Áine Murphy for securing this afternoon's Adjournment debate.

Primary care in a wider sense is generally the first point of contact with the health service for those who become unwell, providing 95% of the care that people need throughout their lifetime. Let me therefore, first off, acknowledge the enormous contribution made by those working in primary care.

While primary care also includes our nurses, health visitors, physiotherapists, social workers, mental health practitioners and community pharmacists, our GPs have shouldered the burden of escalating demand, a declining workforce and real-terms funding cuts like never before.

4.15 pm

As Deborah Erskine said, the recent NI Audit Office report on access to general practice found that almost one in three local practices sought crisis support in the past four years. The absence of a specific workforce strategy for general practice has resulted in the failure to train, recruit, retain and reward staff, which has consequently led to a deterioration of service provision and limited progress on the roll-out of MDTs in local primary care settings. That is the foundation of the health service. Significant levels of funding and transformation are

therefore required. With more than one in 10 GPs in the North leaving the profession last year, the need for support to preserve and protect the existing general practice workforce must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

The sense of urgency feels even more pressing in Fermanagh, where we have all heard and experienced stories of failure to get GP appointments. While people experience difficulties during the day, it was brought to my attention that the whole of Fermanagh was left without out-of-hours GP cover for at least 36 hours one weekend in July, with some constituents being left with no alternative but to pay for a private GP appointment. I know that the Health Minister cannot fix our GP crisis overnight, but I wrote to him highlighting that cause for huge concern and asking that it not happen again. People cannot afford to pay for it. Inevitably, our health will deteriorate if the two-tier health service continues.

Mr Gildernew: I thank Áine for securing the debate. As Deborah stated, the issue affects all of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, with several surgeries lost in the Dungannon area alone. It is a contracts issue, and I know from my time on the Health Committee that it has many factors. At rock bottom, however, the key problem is the lack of availability of general practitioners. Deborah mentioned their ageing profile and the fact that we are seeing so many retirements. Minister, I urge you to do everything that you can to address that issue. I worked previously with your colleague Robin Swann on the indemnity issue, and that has been resolved.

There are probably other outstanding issues, such as professional qualification recognition across the island, that may help us to attract GPs from elsewhere. There is also merit, I think, in prioritising the multidisciplinary teams, as was mentioned. Those other allied health professionals can bring so much to the equation. They often deal with issues better and more directly than GPs, as well as taking pressure off them. In places where there is particular pressure on GPs, I ask the Minister, as the multidisciplinary teams are rolled out, to consider prioritising areas that have reduced cover or are under threat of losing their cover, so that we do not see any further reduction.

Social prescribing also has huge merit. When it comes to transformation more generally, transforming the social element of primary care is important. We had a debate just yesterday on the European social fund and the value that our community and voluntary sector brings. A lot of that value is in health-related areas. We could look at something there. During COVID, a

review was done of what was described as the "alternative workforce". Many of those people were in the community and voluntary sector. There may be areas there that we can look at.

The other area that we could look at is the fact that we now see many more young women coming into general practice. Often, they will require more flexibility or will not want to work five days a week as a general practitioner. Young GPs coming out of medical school often want to specialise. If we can find a way to develop contracts that encourage that, we may see more young students coming into general practice.

It is called primary care for a reason: it is the first point of contact. It is where well-being can be attended to and where illness, deterioration, hospitalisation and a worsening of conditions can be prevented if we get proper GP care out into the community and support general practice to deliver the service that it does so well.

Mr McGrath: Hawk-eyed Members will have noticed that I am not from Fermanagh or South Tyrone, but I am happy to speak on behalf of the SDLP in the Adjournment debate on the important issue of getting rural healthcare services right for people. Fermanagh is a great example, so if we can get it right there, we will be able to get it right in any rural community across the North.

All that I want to do is offer my reflections. Over the summer, as a member of the Health Committee and someone with an interest in health, I visited a number of the bigger GP practices in my constituency to catch up with them, find out how things were going, see what pressures they faced but also see what was working well for them. I know that I am echoing remarks that have been made, but we are really lucky in South Down to have the MDT teams. They are a game changer.

In one of the health centres that I visited, the doctors take between half an hour and an hour in the morning to triage all the calls that come in. Depending on what is needed, they then send the patient to the relevant profession, be that social work, physiotherapy, counselling or pharmacy. One of the GPs said to me, "If somebody rings me up and says that they have a sore elbow, there is very little that I, as a GP, can do". If that GP can send the patient straight to the physiotherapist, however, that person will get the exact care that they need, without having to spend 10 to 15 minutes in a GP slot, only to be told that they need physiotherapy:

they can be directed straight on to the physiotherapy list.

The GPs in that practice spend a bit of time each morning populating the timetable for the rest of those professionals. That means that people get the exact care that they need, which is better care, and are not blocking appointments in the GP practice only to then be sent somewhere else. Those GPs said that that system works fantastically for them. In a rural community, you need to be able to go to a primary care facility and get the treatment that you need there, rather than be signposted somewhere else, which may be a hospital that is 25 or 30 miles, or even further, away. The experience of those MDTs was very positive, and they work well for people in a semi-rural community like the one that we have in South Down. I think that those teams would be of great assistance to existing services.

Another important point that the GPs in that practice raised was that they felt that they were getting work done. They felt that they were directing patients to the services that they needed and that they were therefore getting to see the patients that they actually needed to see. They felt a bit of satisfaction in their work because they were able to do the signposting to other services in their health facility and get people appointments much more quickly. That gave them a sense of reward in their jobs, which is what makes people want to go into work each day. By contrast, in health centres that are just trying to get through long lists that they never catch up with, the GPs never get enough of their work done and start to feel stressed. If they feel stressed and unhappy in their work, they will want to go somewhere else where they do not have those pressures. Then you end up with practices that collapse.

We all know that MDTs are a game changer, and we can see what they do. I hope that the Minister can give some feedback on how quickly we can get them rolled out even further so that we can provide those services where people need them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Minister, you have up to 10 minutes.

Mr Nesbitt (The Minister of Health): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank Áine Murphy for securing the Adjournment debate, and I thank the Members who have contributed. This is an opportunity to recognise and pay tribute to the fantastic work that is carried out by our primary care services.

It is obvious that I am on my own in the Chamber, in a party political sense. Baron Elliott of Ballinamallard would have loved to have taken part in the debate, as he represents the area, but he was called away, and our health spokesperson, Alan Chambers, has been inconvenienced this afternoon. So, it should not be taken as a lack of interest from my party on the issue.

I will come to Members comments presently. Over the past three and a half months, I have had the opportunity to meet many staff working across primary care, including a number of representatives from the South West GP Federation. We are very fortunate to have such a dedicated workforce. I am very aware of the challenges that face general practice. Those are particularly felt in rural communities, because there is a feeling there of being left out of public services and investment more generally. I appreciate that some people in Fermanagh have concerns about whether they will continue to be able to access high-quality primary care in their area. Those concerns are, of course, not unique to Fermanagh, but they carry a particular weight in rural areas. I reassure you that my Department has worked and will continue to work very closely with GP representatives on how best to respond to those challenges.

As some of you will be aware, I want to make it my mission to tackle health inequalities in Northern Ireland. I have announced plans for a pilot scheme under the banner "Live Better" that is aimed at taking services right into the heart of the community and making a positive difference to people's life. I am very aware of the recent issues that were raised in the media about escalating tensions at the GP premises in Lisnaskea. Let me make this clear: that behaviour is absolutely unacceptable, and I condemn it utterly. I fully support our primary care staff and value the dedication that they show daily to those who need them.

You asked about the new health and care centre in Lisnaskea. That facility will support the delivery of integrated primary and community care services for the population of Lisnaskea and the surrounding area of east Fermanagh. I hope that I will not frustrate you too much when I say that the announcement is imminent. *[Laughter.]* Boom. I am sorry. There is no issue that I am aware of that will delay it. It will happen. It is tied in with a couple of other announcements. They need to be tied down — the i's need to be dotted and the t's crossed — and then I will be ready to go. Imminent means imminent.

Ms Á Murphy: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Nesbitt: Of course I will give way to the very frustrated Member.

Ms Á Murphy: Thank you to the Minister for giving way. Are we liable to see diggers on the ground before the end of 2024?

Mr Nesbitt: I will get back to you. *[Laughter.]* There have been too many broken promises to make a promise in the Chamber. I want to get the time frames absolutely nailed down. I promise that, when I say "imminent", I do not mean weeks and months.

I acknowledge and appreciate the need to further stabilise and bolster capacity for services in primary care more generally. I fully understand the ongoing challenges that patients and GPs along with their teams face, not least the increasing demand and resultant increasing workloads. Colm Gildernew's point about the workforce was extremely well made. When we think about health and social care, we think about buildings, equipment and medicines, but they do not matter, or they do not count, because they cannot deliver without the workforce and the people.

Officials in my Department have worked hard to ensure that, where contracts have been handed back, no practice has closed — I commend them for that — and patients have continued to access GP services in their area. Stability of services across Northern Ireland will require new ways of thinking about how our services are organised. In Fermanagh, the Western Trust is playing a leading role in promoting stability through holding the contracts for GP practices that have got into difficulty. There are three such practices in Fermanagh, and my Department is supporting the Western Trust to move towards a more sustainable model for service provision in those practices through the appointment of salaried GPs. That will help to strengthen the service in those practices and reduce reliance on locums, which is a very expensive way of doing business.

We cannot continue with a situation where, in some instances, GPs face such sustained levels of pressure that they feel that the only course of action left open is to hand back their contact. I want to build resilience and capacity in that service. However, I am under no illusion that the new 2024-25 contract will resolve all the challenges that face GPs. The issues that are impacting general practice are complex and will require a sustained and long-term response.

4.30 pm

In a standard week, our general medical services clinical teams carry out over 200,000 consultations, over half of which are face-to-face. I think that that maybe explains part of the pressure on access to services. I also share this with Members: according to our Business Services Organisation, we currently have 1,448 GPs, excluding locums. That is an increase over the past 10 years of just about a quarter: 22.7%. Per 100,000 registered population, we are just behind Scotland in the headcount of GPs. Scotland has 77.1 GPs per 100,000 registered population; we have 70.9 GPs, which compares really favourably, particularly with England, which has the lowest ratio at 56.4. That suggests that we should not have the problems that we are having to endure at the moment, so I am determined to work at that.

Jemma Dolan made the point that 95% of first contact is at a primary level. That is true, but it is also true that primary gets 5.4% of the total budget. I would like to see that go up really significantly. That is why I am promoting what Professor Bengoa called the "shift left". In an ideal world, if you need access to healthcare, you get it in your home, and if you cannot get it in your home, you get it as close to your home as possible in a GP surgery, a community centre or whatever. The second-worst outcome is having to go to an acute hospital. The worst outcome is having to go to an acute hospital and stay overnight. The problem with the budget is that, if you are in an acute hospital, that is where the big problems and the expensive processes to fix are. To shift the budget left will require health inequalities and health literacy to be tackled, and people to be more conscious about staying healthy and not getting sick.

Deborah Erskine talked about promoting the beautiful constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Áine Murphy asked whether I would meet her to talk about problems in south Fermanagh. I most certainly will, but maybe we should do it in the beautiful constituency of Strangford. Maybe we should go down to Harrisons on Strangford lough and have a little meeting there. Other restaurants are available.

What else can I say in response? I want to talk about multidisciplinary teams. Professor Bengoa reported eight years ago. Some people think that that report went on to a shelf. It did not; we have started actioning it and shifting left. We have daycare procedures in places such as Lagan Valley. We have elective overnight centres, such as the South West Acute Hospital, and I hope that we will develop

the Causeway Hospital in the fullness of time. Things are happening. The professor is coming back — he is scheduled to be here on 9 October — to reboot that report. That is when I am going to say, "We need to finish this deal". Multidisciplinary teams clearly work. They are probably the biggest success story of recent years in transforming our health service. Seven of the 17 GP federations have MDTs. Fermanagh and South Tyrone is down to be one of the three in the next tranche, but I gently say this to the Members opposite and Mrs Erskine: you voted for the Budget. We did not vote for the Budget in this party, and one of the reasons was that we were not going to be able to roll out the MDTs as we would wish.

Let us speak again after the debate about south Fermanagh.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Thank you very much, Minister, and thank you, everybody, for your contributions to the debate.

Adjourned at 4.34 pm.