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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 11 May 2021

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Ministerial Statement

### Redevelopment of CAFRE's Greenmount and Loughry Campuses and the Development of New Beef Facilities at AFBI and CAFRE

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members in the Chamber that, in light of social distancing being observed by the parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members who are participating remotely must make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members who are present in the Chamber must also do that and may do so by rising in their place, as well as by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. I also remind Members that points of order are not normally taken during a statement or the question period afterwards.

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you say, Mr Speaker, we are about to hear a statement from the Agriculture Minister. Of course, we were able to read that statement, effectively, in Saturday's 'Farming Life', and, today, we have had the Economy Minister in the media announcing what she is calling an economic vision for a decade of innovation. Why is it that the way that we now seem to do government is that the Assembly is an afterthought, or not thought of at all, when it comes to ministerial proclamations?

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for his point of order. The Member will be aware that I have raised repeatedly with the Executive, through the past year or so, the point that it is very important — indeed, essential — to respect the role of the Assembly. For the most, that has been adhered to, but the Member's point is on the record. Perhaps the question could be put

to the Minister directly, and to the other Minister referred to at a later point. I will, of course, refer the remarks that the Member has made this morning to the Executive Office.

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to make a short statement to the House about two major investments by my Department. It was an oversight on my part that the first one went out publicly before I got it to the Assembly. I apologise to you, Mr Speaker, for that.

We look to underpin the future sustainable growth of the Northern Ireland agri-food industry through this investment. The first is a £75 million investment in the educational facilities at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) that will revolutionise the campuses at Loughry and Greenmount, where around 1,500 students are being educated to take the agri-food industry into the next generation. Those facilities were built over 50 years ago and are now at the end of life. It is, therefore, fitting that my Department is making this investment in the centenary year of Northern Ireland. CAFRE has a well renowned reputation in the agri-food industry for providing excellent tuition and training facilities for the next generation of farmers, growers and agri-food personnel.

Our agri-food sector has faced many challenges over the past century and has grown to develop a global reputation for high-quality food and traceability. It is now time to invest in each campus in order to provide modern and well-designed facilities that will meet the needs of students, staff and industry during the next century. The investment complements the recent launch of the Bachelor of Science with honours degrees in sustainable agriculture and horticulture and the higher level apprenticeships in food and will ensure that CAFRE remains at the forefront of agri-food education across these islands. The plans for Loughry will also include a science centre, which will be shared with food research staff in the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI). Those top-class

facilities will be the centre of knowledge and innovation for the industry leaders and decision-makers of the future.

I am pleased to announce an investment of £10 million to commence the development of new beef research facilities at AFBI, Hillsborough, and CAFRE. Those new facilities will integrate the future development of research, technology transfer and education at AFBI and CAFRE, which will assist in the delivery of my green growth initiative. In order to ensure that the Northern Ireland beef industry has a vibrant future as a trading sector, we must keep pace and compete on the world stage. The current beef facilities at AFBI and CAFRE are no longer fit for purpose. Investment in new beef facilities will ensure that AFBI and CAFRE have the capacity to carry out leading-edge research and demonstrate technologies in order to support the delivery of education programmes and underpin beef farms across Northern Ireland for the next 30 years. Those new facilities will be critical to ensuring the positive contribution of beef production to the management of the rural environment and to supporting the rural economy. The project will provide multiple long-term benefits for the Northern Ireland beef industry, agri-food industry and wider economy.

I also welcome the fact that the design and construction of the new buildings will be environmentally sustainable and will enhance the well-being of all who use, live and work in them. The combined investment of £85 million in the CAFRE campuses and AFBI research facilities will ensure that both those organisations deliver for the future of Northern Ireland's agri-food industry.

**Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** I very much welcome the Minister's announcement of this overdue and well-deserved investment. Minister, has any consideration been given to working in partnership with other such research centres across the island of Ireland? Have you any assessment of how this investment could benefit our inclusion in the protected geographical indication (PGI) status for Irish grass-fed beef?

**Mr Poots:** There are two issues there. PGI status for Irish grass-fed beef should have been applied for jointly. Unfortunately, the Republic of Ireland Government decided to charge ahead without Northern Ireland, in spite of the fact that we were ready to go. They used a fairly puerile excuse for not doing it together. It reflects very badly on the Republic of Ireland Government that they did not work together with us on that. I

am also looking to develop a British PGI status so that we can genuinely achieve the best of both worlds.

With regard to working with the Science Institute in Ireland, we have suggested that, when it comes to the sequestration of carbon, which is very important given yesterday's debate, work is done jointly because the same issues will apply. Therefore, we will get value for money by doing that. That is something that AFBI is working on with Teagasc.

**Mr Irwin:** I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome the sizeable investment of £85 million in AFBI and CAFRE, which will certainly give confidence in the future of the agri-food industry.

The Minister outlined an important £10 million investment in beef facilities at AFBI, Hillsborough, and CAFRE. Will he outline why that investment is important for the beef sector in Northern Ireland in particular?

**Mr Poots:** The beef research facilities at AFBI are at end of life, so their ability to carry out accredited research on beef was being lost. New facilities are therefore critical to them.

Considering the debate that we had yesterday on climate change, the work on how we can improve our beef output and reduce the amount of carbon produced from it is critical to the beef industry as we go forward. We have one of the best beef industries anywhere in the world. That is why it appals me when, without thinking of the consequences, people glibly walk through the Lobbies to destroy the beef industry, as happened yesterday. The fact is that, in traceability, provenance, quality and environmental impact, we are ahead of most parts of the world, and we can do even better. The quality of the beef industry in Northern Ireland can go from gold-plated to platinum-plated. That is why we need to invest in our beef industry and ensure that we provide support to allow it to develop and continue to be one of the big income generators and employers in Northern Ireland, in spite of the worst efforts of others.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the Minister for this very welcome investment, some of which is in a well-known and highly reputable facility in the constituency of Mid Ulster. Is there a particular time frame for the sequence of events that will follow: the design, tendering and projected completion dates of the various projects?

**Mr Poots:** The design and planning process and so forth will start straight away. Normally, it takes around two years to deal with those issues for this sort of thing, and then it moves forward to the actual development, which is likely to take under two years. Over the next three to four years, we will see things happen, with substantial change at both campuses and at AFBI.

**Mrs Barton:** Minister, I, too, welcome the investment in the Greenmount and Loughry campuses for the future of our young people who wish to work towards a career in the agri-food industry. Thank you for that. Has consideration been given to increasing the university status of Greenmount by offering an increased number of agricultural or agriculture-based courses there?

I hope that you do not mind my asking a little extra question: has consideration been given to a university course in equine studies, perhaps in the west, such as at the Enniskillen campus?

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for her questions. We have recently developed a Bachelor of Science honours course, which is delivered through CAFRE, and we are working with the universities to develop other opportunities. There are tremendous opportunities for Northern Ireland to be a place where people come to be trained and educated in the agricultural environment and agri-food. Our colleges will lead and work with the universities to develop those. The Member knows that I am very keen to establish a veterinary school in Northern Ireland. The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) has recently been engaging with universities on that, so background work is being carried out to develop that.

The equine studies provided at the Enniskillen campus are top-notch. The campus is utilised by people from all over the world, and students from the Enniskillen campus travel all over the world to develop equine skills.

What is being provided at Enniskillen is excellent, but, of course, it can be improved on. If proposals are brought to me that will improve that further, I will be very happy to support them.

**10.45 am**

**Mr Blair:** I thank the Minister for the statement, and I, too, welcome the detail in it. We are living in a time of increased environmental awareness, and all of us want to build back

better post COVID. I note that the Minister, understandably, referenced his green growth strategy. My party's recently published document, 'A Green New Deal', seeks to commit to assist farmers in diversification programmes such as agritourism. Minister, does the planned investment seek to enhance diversification opportunities and learning?

**Mr Poots:** The focus of this is on education and training in the area of agri-food, so the focus is not on diversification. I recognise the importance of diversification. That will be carried out in other ways. I recognise the importance of rural tourism and of getting that up and running again. I hope that the Executive will make the right decisions over the next number of days and enable people to travel from Great Britain to Northern Ireland to enjoy the tourism offer here in rural communities and, indeed, in other places. Let us get our economy growing again.

**Mr M Bradley:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, I welcome the combined £85 million investment in CAFRE at Greenmount and Loughry and in AFBI, and I also welcome the discussions with the SIB about a veterinary college for Northern Ireland. I am very interested in that. Minister, will both investments that have been outlined today have an environmental improvement and sustainability element to their design?

**Mr Poots:** Absolutely. Given that the current buildings were developed, I think, in the 1950s or 1960s, they are not fit for purpose in terms of environment nowadays and would have to be retrofitted, which would be hugely expensive. It is much better to build from scratch to improve what is on offer. I recognise that that needs to be done. I also recognise that the new beef facilities will be developed to reduce the carbon footprint in those facilities, but they will also be a demonstration of what is achievable in farming in reducing the carbon footprint in the keeping of beef cattle. All those things are critical, because CAFRE and AFBI have to be at the leading edge and be capable of demonstrating to the farming community what is possible.

The Member has been a very strong advocate for the veterinary school and, in particular, the Coleraine campus, but we have to be at the leading edge of that science as well. It is critical that Northern Ireland can produce its own vets and have the research facilities to go with that. In my opinion, that should have happened years ago, and I am hugely supportive of that

happening now. I want to move that ahead over the next year.

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome both investments and the announcement on new beef facilities at AFBI. It cannot be overstated just how important the new research and knowledge transfer facilities are to our industry. Minister, what other strategies has the Department put in place to develop young people's agricultural skills and knowledge?

**Mr Poots:** We have a close working relationship with young people. Last week, I provided support to the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster, which do a tremendous job. That is not just people from farming backgrounds but people who have an interest in rural affairs. Many of the people who engage in the Young Farmers' Clubs, for example, are young people from an urban background who absolutely love the rural lifestyle and love to get out and engage with young people from a rural background. We are constantly investing, updating and looking at how we can support young people in the area of agri-food.

Work is being done, for example, in Loughry on agri-food.

Anybody who goes to Loughry has a job before they leave. It provides young people with a tremendous opportunity. The science and innovation available there — how we reduce levels of non-recyclables in packaging, and the work that is done with large companies in Northern Ireland to enable them to be at the cutting edge of everything that they do — is absolutely tremendous. We can be proud of it. We have a joined-up ecosystem for agri-food, and this is an investment in that ecosystem.

**Mr Harvey:** I welcome the announcement, especially given that it is some 50 years since this level of investment was last made. Does the Minister agree that many farms suffer from an underinvestment in buildings, which then impacts on their efficiency?

**Mr Poots:** I do. Moreover, from an environmental viewpoint, we need to invest in agriculture, and we need to invest big. If the people who voted in the Aye Lobby yesterday support me in trying to meet the challenges that face agriculture environmentally, I am sure that they will support my forthcoming bid to the Department of Finance for funding to assist us to achieve higher environmental standards and to ensure that there are cleaner waterways and fewer emissions in the air. I am sure that the

most important and significant industry in Northern Ireland — the one with the highest number of employees and a £5 billion turnover — is something that we will support. The Northern Ireland Government will put their money where their mouth is, because there is no point in walking through the Aye Lobby to vote for something that you want if you are not prepared to support it financially. I am sure that I will get massive support from the Minister of Finance to deliver for the agriculture community.

**Mr McHugh:** I thank the Minister for his statement. The skills challenge in rural areas is significant in every respect. Providing financial support to education and having modern facilities are pivotal, not only to the sustainability of the industry but to rural economies. You have answered one of my questions, which was to do with when construction will start. To what extent will the new facilities increase capacity for those who are engaged in the industry?

**Mr Poots:** A lot of work is being done online currently. We will therefore have the opportunity to look at the colleges' capacity. There is good demand for the courses. As I indicated, particularly on the agri-food side, people on those courses have a job before they leave. We want to encourage that kind of progress, development and skills base so that the agri-food sector does not go backwards. In spite of the debate yesterday, I am determined that we will not go backwards, and I am determined that the agri-food sector will continue to grow, provide employment and put food on people's tables and roofs over their heads. In this centenary year, this is an investment in the future of Northern Ireland. Most importantly, it is an investment in the young people who will be in Northern Ireland for the next century.

**Ms Sheerin:** I echo the thanks to the Minister for the announcement of the investment in the CAFRE campuses at Loughry and Greenmount. As a Mid Ulster MLA, I am aware of Loughry's unique course provision and how important that is to anybody who wants to pursue a career in agriculture or any of the other particular threads.

Does the Minister agree that the investment has the potential to provide an economic boost to the big town of Cookstown, which the Loughry campus is just beside?

**Mr Poots:** It does, yes. The major part of the investment is in the science centre and other facilities at the Loughry campus. It is critical that

we are at the cutting edge of science, and Loughry is. We have very skilful people there. They need the facilities to go with those skills, and that is what this is about. It is about ensuring that we have the appropriate facilities along with the appropriate people. Dungannon, where there is a huge food sector, Cookstown, Portadown and other places in the mid-Ulster region and beyond will really benefit from having that kind of facility on their doorstep.

We are working with all the biggest companies in Northern Ireland — Coca-Cola, Moy Park, Dunbia, Linden Foods, Foyle Food Group, you name it — to ensure that, when supermarkets make enquiries about the product that they require, we are right up there in the packaging, provenance and viability of the food so that they can see the backup that there is in Northern Ireland. That is a real selling point and will provide a great opportunity for us as we go to more international markets. We recently broke into the American market for beef again after 20 years of being out of it. We will be getting into new markets. It is critical that we can sustain the businesses that are selling to those markets by having a qualitative backup, and that will exist.

**Ms Ennis:** I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. As was said many times yesterday, and I will reiterate today, agriculture is a key and valued part of our economy, and modern, fit for purpose educational facilities are key to its future. What assurances can the Minister give that disruption at CAFRE, and to the courses at Greenmount and Loughry, will be minimised over the next years?

**Mr Poots:** I can absolutely assure the Member that disruption will be at a minimum. There will be no disruption to the courses that are available.

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Minister for the welcome news of substantial investment in modernising the education and research facilities. In your statement, Minister, you said that the investment complements the recent launch of degrees in sustainable agriculture and horticulture. How many degree programmes are on offer, and how many places are on offer within them? Are there any further plans to expand sustainable education in the sector?

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for the question. I cannot give you the exact figure, but I will correspond with you on it. On the latter part of the question, we will continue to work with the universities to ensure that CAFRE can deliver accredited courses to degree level. I want to

open up further opportunities for that. I want to keep more young people in Northern Ireland for their third-level education. In my view, far too many young people have to travel to Great Britain and further afield for their third-level education. For some, leaving to study is a choice; for many others, it is not a choice because the opportunities do not exist in Northern Ireland. I am investing in young people and in young people's staying in Northern Ireland to be educated here. They can make their choices thereafter about what they wish to do with their lives, but let us ensure that we provide the best possible opportunities for them to be here.

**Mr Allister:** I welcome these investments. I want to ask an AFBI-specific question. AFBI's laboratory testing is very important to our food exports etc. To date, it has been fully accredited to the UK accreditation system. However, courtesy of the iniquitous protocol, the EU is now dictating that the UK accreditation service is no longer acceptable. That has caused AFBI, according to its board minutes, to consider linking to the Republic of Ireland for accreditation. Would that be acceptable to the Minister?

**11.00 am**

**Mr Poots:** The Member knows that the protocol per se is not acceptable to the Minister. We will do everything that we can, politically and legally, to ensure that we find ourselves in an acceptable position. An acceptable position is one that does not have blockages between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The protocol is bad for the economy. It is bad for consumers. It is bad for agriculture. Therefore, we need to continue to challenge it and to raise those issues at the highest level of government. I have been doing that. I will continue to do that. I will look at legal recourse that is completely different from the other legal remedies that have been sought. We must take every legitimate opportunity to ensure that Northern Ireland is not worse off as a consequence of the protocol, which did not involve the referendum that should have been required for the constitutional change that has been imposed upon Northern Ireland.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the news for Northern Ireland, particularly Loughry in my Mid Ulster constituency. Loughry has had a massive impact on agriculture and the food sector for the past 100 years. I worked in it for nearly a quarter of a century. You probably look at me and think that that could not be, but maybe

others think that it could. It is dear to my heart. I noted the points made about the impact that it has had on the businesses that employ engineers, food workers production staff.

In the past 100 years, Loughry has had a massive impact. What of the next 100 years? I also ask the Minister for clarification. Some people think that Northern Ireland stops at Dundonald. There is more to Northern Ireland than Dundonald. Agriculture has a massive impact: if the agriculture sector has money, everybody has money.

**Mr Poots:** That has always been a saying. I heard it in the quarries and from the builders. When farming is doing well, we are all doing well. I want to ensure that farming does well and that we continue to invest in progress.

I know that the Member worked for many years in some of the leading facilities and was involved in cutting-edge work, making the plants capable of being competitive and ensuring that they were maintained to a standard that allowed them to deliver what the supermarket and commercial sectors demanded of them. It is absolutely critical. It is a highly pressurised business and having the qualified people in the workforce is critical. With the quality of training in Loughry and the agri-food sector, people can get good pay for doing their jobs. We need to continue to drive that. That is why the investment is critical to ensuring that we have the right people to support that magnificent industry.

When we go into the Senate Chamber, we see three industries remembered: linen, shipbuilding and agri-food. That reflects the positions of those industries in the 1920s. I hope that, when people go in there 100 years from now, the agriculture industry will still be powerful and leading-edge in Northern Ireland, not only on the farms but in the factories, with qualitative science supporting everything that we do, from the birth of an animal to the product ending up on someone's table.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Minister for his statement. There is no doubt that it is a significant act of confidence not only in our young people but in the wider agri-food sector, in which my constituency of Upper Bann and my county of Armagh play a key role.

What change is envisaged in the blueprint across Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to AFBI, given these plans? Does he expect much change?

**Mr Poots:** AFBI cannot currently do accredited research into beef because its facilities have become so poor. The development will make a difference to AFBI by enabling it to do that research into beef, which can then be sold across the world.

AFBI is recognised across the world for the quality of its work. Some of its work on grass seed, for example, has led to it receiving royalties from significant companies across the world. It receives royalties from other countries because of its quality of research. We need to ensure that, as an organisation, it can continue to do that and to provide leading, cutting-edge research that can not only be utilised in Northern Ireland but be sold elsewhere to support further investment and research and to keep Northern Ireland at the cutting edge of agriculture and agri-food.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

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

## Private Members' Business

### Autism Strategy

**Mr Gildernew:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes with deep concern that, by the end of 2020, almost 4,500 children across health and social care trusts were awaiting diagnosis for autism, with some reportedly waiting more than two years; recognises the distress and harm that this places on those awaiting diagnosis and tailored support services, as well as on their families; expresses its concern at the growing inequality of access to autism services and diagnosis; further notes the stark difference in waiting times across health and social care trusts; and calls on the Minister of Health to bring forward a longer-term strategy, to be progressed urgently in partnership with those with autism, their families, carers and community and voluntary sector organisations, to ensure equality of care and services that are free at the point of access and based on need.*

**Mr 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 an amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List, the Business Committee has agreed that 15 minutes will be added to the total time for the debate. Please open the debate on the motion.

**Mr Gildernew:** I welcome the debate. I certainly hope that it engenders a sense of unity and purpose on what is an extremely difficult issue for many thousands of people in our community who struggle to access autism services or to deal with the lack of access even to the diagnosis process, let alone the supports that potentially should flow from it.

In the quarter ending in December 2020, 1,010 children were referred for an autism diagnosis, and 387 received a diagnosis. As of that date, 4,495 children were waiting for an autism assessment, and, of those, 1,457 had been waiting for over a year. Those 1,457 children came from three trust areas: the Belfast Trust, Northern Trust and Western Trust areas. It is important to remember that delays in receiving a diagnosis affect adults as well as children and young adults. At the end of February 2020, 997

adults were waiting for an adult autism assessment. Too often, the wait to get a diagnosis is just the first step; there is a lifetime of struggling ahead for the families of those with autism. Although the motion is focused on the unacceptable delays in getting an assessment and diagnosis, it is important for us all to remember that wider needs and pathway issues also need to be addressed. A longer-term strategy that is produced alongside those with autism and their families can directly influence the development of pre- and post-diagnostic support and intervention. We know that early intervention is key, but what hope is there for effective and successful early intervention services if the waiting list for a diagnosis stretches years into the future?

In April, Minister, you announced plans for rebuilding trusts and stated rightly:

*"Our health service prides itself on being available to all and free at the point of access. I contend that we are still in grave danger of undermining this essential feature of our health service. With ever-growing waiting lists, I question whether all of our citizens have adequate access to the health service that they need."*

— [Official Report (Hansard), 13 April 2021, p2, col 2].

The answer is a simple no. As we can all see and know now, many citizens do not have access to the health services that they need, free at the point of access. Over the past number of months and weeks, in particular, I have heard countless stories of families being told that they face years on a waiting list but could get a diagnosis sooner if they went private. I have been working with the family of a young man in my constituency whose autism difficulties, while they were not emerging for the first time, became clear when he went to university. He is a capable young fella and had been top student in his school in fifth year. Pádraig and his parents struggled to get through the system and to get help. For context, his mother is a retired nurse and had been a nurse all her life; his father is a retired nursing lecturer. Both of them had time, resources and skills and knew the system, and they struggled. They have told me that they went into a very dark place as a family. I use that example just to highlight the fact that it affects many people. I hear that constantly. We hear constantly the analogy of people "battling" and "struggling" all the time with regard to autism services.

I highlighted that the 1,457 children who have been waiting over 52 weeks for an autism

assessment came from only three of the trust areas. We must look at the element of it that is a postcode lottery and at how we can address that.

### 11.15 am

Being forced to go private for an assessment adds another pressure on families and those with autism to fork out money that they simply may not have, so they borrow, which puts them into debt. Worryingly, there are also developing and increasing inequalities. Not only is the cost prohibitive and creating a two-tier service for those who can afford to go private but there is the growing postcode divide that I mentioned.

Ten years ago, the trusts did not accept a private diagnosis. I asked the Department how many private assessments or diagnoses for autism were accepted by each of the trusts and was told that that information was not collected. If we do not know the scale and extent of the problem, it is more difficult to develop the solution. I was shocked by that. An old business adage is, "What gets measured gets done". I am concerned that, if we do not capture the growing extent of the problem, it will take longer and be harder to address. Not only are families being forced to wait longer but they should rightly expect to receive that diagnosis through their health service. The Department of Health does not have oversight of how many of those are accepted or what proportion of the accepted diagnoses is private. I urge the Minister to look into that issue and see whether he can examine whether the principle of healthcare being free at the point of need is being undermined, particularly in autism services.

I openly recognise and accept that COVID-19 has had an impact on the assessment services and supports that are offered across the entire health service. For example, 670 children received a diagnosis of autism for the quarter ending March 2020: for each quarter after the start of the pandemic, the number was 133 up to June, 83 up to September and 387 up to December. Addressing the backlog of growing waiting lists is not an overnight fix, and everyone here recognises that. It is a complex issue, and I do not want to underplay or underscore the difficulties attached to that area of work.

Recently, I heard an example of a young girl with anxiety who faced a waiting list to access child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). The family went for a private assessment at a cost of £1,600, and, with that diagnosis, they progressed only as far as the next waiting list for the service. Mothers, fathers

and families describe as exhausting the process of engaging with services and getting a diagnosis. It has been said to me in recent meetings, "We are not living; we are barely existing". Other people said, "It is torture for us. We are stuck between a rock and a hard place" and, "Nobody listens, and nobody gives us any help". Those are the comments that are coming back. That is one of the areas in which I hope that we can do something in the short term.

On the longer-term issues, I note that the Department published an interim autism strategy for 2021-22. It, however, has no measurable targets, which is important in light of what I said earlier. Also, we all probably query whether a two-year strategy can address the many long-standing issues that were not fully addressed by the previous strategy or by the Autism Act 2011. The motion calls on the Minister to bring forward a long-term strategy that involves families in a meaningful way in the design, production and delivery of services, putting those families at the centre of that entire process. I acknowledge that this is clearly an issue that affects much more than health services and more than the Department of Health. It will require other Departments to step forward, with the Department of Education being a key one. I urge the Minister and the Executive to look at the cross-departmental element of this and coordinate those services for people. At this point, however, it is not enough merely to report and acknowledge the problems. We need to see the figures, and we need to see how we can address the problems and create solutions.

I want to touch on carers today. Clearly, this has a massive impact on those caring for people with autism. For those who need support, it is often a family member or carer who provides the vast majority of that support. Over the past couple of months, I have met hundreds of people who are at breaking point. They are trying to support their loved ones in a situation where services have been withdrawn and additional pressure put on them, particularly around the difficulties that can be created as a result of autism. One mother described how her child, now in his twenties, is an adult whose needs are very different from when she started asking her local school for help. She will always consider him to be her child, and she will fight tooth and nail for those services.

However, it is exhausting for carers; trying to navigate their way through the system is wearing them down.

I welcome the amendment. I am very happy to support it and to work with everyone. I recognise that massive amounts of work have been done by Members for a long time on the issue. We need to look carefully at how we address improvement. Clearly, some trusts are doing better than others. Can we adopt some of what they are doing and have a more strategic approach?

On communication and navigating the system, can we look, even in the short term, at providing a single point of contact for families so that they do not have to repeat their situation and story constantly and can access services? Some of those things might help in the interim.

**Mrs Cameron:** I beg to move the following amendment:

*Leave out all after the first "awaiting" and insert:*

*"a diagnostic assessment for autism, with some reportedly waiting more than two years, which exceeds the autism assessment standard of 13 weeks from the point of the initial referral; recognises the distress and harm that this places on those awaiting diagnosis and tailored support services, as well as on their families; expresses its concern at the growing inequality of access to autism services and diagnosis; further notes the stark difference in waiting times across health and social care trusts; and calls on the Minister of Health to bring forward a longer-term strategy that sets out measurable targets against which its successes may be assessed by an independent body, to be progressed urgently in partnership with those with autism, their families, carers and community and voluntary sector organisations, to ensure equality of care and services that are free at the point of access and based on need."*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member will have 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the amendment.

**Mrs Cameron:** At the outset, I thank the Members opposite for tabling today's motion. I trust that they and, hopefully, the whole House will be able to support the amendment, which seeks to build on and strengthen the original wording of the motion on such an important topic.

As chair of the all-party group (APG) on autism, I am deeply concerned about the many issues that face the autism community today. Since

the Autism Act in 2011, it is true to say that things have got worse rather than better for autistic families and adults in Northern Ireland. Advocacy organisations such as Autism NI have worked hard over the past 15 years and have lobbied our Executive relentlessly. They report back to the all-party group on autism regularly about the lack of autism support services. Current waiting times for an autism diagnosis are completely unacceptable. A complete overhaul of the current assessment process is urgently needed. It is hard to believe that some families are waiting for over two years to gain an assessment for their child and that some adults are waiting for up to four years. That is a complete travesty. There are disparities among the five trusts. According to the latest figures, the Belfast Trust and the Northern Trust have consistently had children and adults waiting the longest time for an assessment. On the other hand, the Southern Trust and the South Eastern Trust are able to provide an autism assessment within the recommended 13 weeks. Why is that?

From my consultations with autism families and autistic individuals over the years, I understand how important it is to access timely interventions and tailored supports. However, the only way to access those interventions and supports is through gaining a diagnosis. Many families and individuals feel that they have no choice but to seek a private diagnosis and pay for it themselves, which costs up to £1,400. With a private diagnosis, families and individuals can access supports straight away, while those on the NHS waiting lists wait for years for those same supports. Inevitably, that is causing inequalities in the Northern Ireland health system, and it cannot be ignored any longer. No family should be disadvantaged due to its economic status, but that is what the rise in private diagnosis is causing. I also emphasise that the prevalence of autism is 37% higher in deprived areas compared with the Northern Ireland average.

I will read out a recent case example from a parent with two children who have a diagnosis of autism:

*"My daughter, aged seven, was diagnosed with autism at four years old through the trust after being on the waiting list for one and a half years. However, my son, aged three, was diagnosed privately only last week as I couldn't wait any longer to access supports. This has cost me thousands of pounds, but I'm very fortunate to have had help from family, but I know many parents who are at breaking point out there because*

*they cannot do that. This is just heartbreaking."*

It has to be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a particularly difficult time for our autism community. Some autism support services stopped completely during the period. The unexpected changes, such as the closure of schools and workplaces, has had a detrimental impact on anxiety levels and the emotional well-being of so many autistic people.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Member for giving way and for her amendment. I recognise that this is, basically, a health motion. The Member has just mentioned the closure of schools. If we are to address autism and allow those young people, in particular, to maximise their potential in society, surely we need a strategy that is health-oriented and education-oriented. Only when we get that joined-up approach from the two relevant Departments will the young people diagnosed be able to take their full place in society by maximising their potential and playing a full role. At the moment, we are tending to let them down.

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I completely agree. Without a doubt, it is a cross-departmental issue that needs much concentration across the entirety of government.

It was recently reported that, owing to the pandemic, 63% of autistic young people have stated that their mental health has got worse. Some 79% of autistic adults have stated that they feel socially isolated because of the pandemic. Two thirds of autistic young people have stated that they did not receive any support during lockdown. It feels as though that community is so easily forgotten about when it comes to remembering it at the most important of times. That is the reason that I have dedicated so much of my time to supporting our autistic community through my role on the all-party group on autism.

I put on record my thanks to the cross-party membership of the APG and give a special thank-you to Autism NI for the vast amount of work that it has done to date and for its continued provision of a secretariat to the group. Since the pandemic, the APG has continued to meet monthly virtually. In those meetings, we have learnt from Autism NI — a charity dealing with the current autism crisis on the front line — about the many issues that affect the autism community. Autism NI has repeatedly reported to the group that there needs to be better investment in autism

services and that the current autism strategy is not fit for purpose.

From what I have heard in my constituency, I completely agree with that narrative. From my own examination of what has unfolded since the Autism Act came in 10 years ago, it is clear to see that the autism strategy from 2013 to 2020 and the resulting action plans have failed. That failure is evidenced by the fact that only one out of three action plans was completed in the period and that there has been no independent review of its success, outside of the Department's internal reviews.

For that reason, and for all the aforementioned reasons, with the full support of the all-party group on autism, I have sponsored a private Member's Bill (PMB), the aim of which is to strengthen the Autism Act by introducing an independent scrutiny mechanism to drive forward the regional implementation of key services through the existing autism legislation. The autism PMB will address the lack of accountability, independent scrutiny and transparency that has curtailed the potential of key elements of the current legislation.

Those issues were highlighted in the PMB's public consultation process, which attracted in excess of 1,800 responses back in October 2020. Indeed, that public consultation received more responses than any other legislative consultation on a private Member's Bill in Northern Ireland's history. That shows the level of concern in the autism community and among professionals over the need for legislative action to deliver a system that works for autistic individuals and their families.

The issues that are to be addressed in the private Member's Bill include the introduction of an independent body that will review the autism strategy. That is key to ensuring that targets are met and adhered to. That was reinforced in the public consultation, as 92% of respondents supported the need for an independent scrutiny mechanism. They believe that, for autism services, scrutiny, transparency and research are currently inadequate.

Another aspect of the private Member's Bill will be to introduce a cross-departmental autism training strategy. That was reinforced by 95% of consultation respondents stating that having accredited autism training, particularly in the areas of education and health and social care, would deliver better outcomes for the autism community. Support for autism services also registered as a significant area of concern in the consultation, with over 94% of respondents stating that adult services, including for

supported living, employment and emotional well-being were top concerns. The private Member's Bill will therefore have a specific focus on the provision of consistent adult autism services.

The evidence that was provided to the public consultation also reaffirms the issues that will be raised in today's debate and supports the need for greater consistency in assessment and post-diagnostic services across trusts. I hope that the private Member's Bill will have its First Stage in the very near future.

Finally, with the latest autism statistics to be presented by the Department of Health over the next few days, the contents of the report will no doubt provide another wake-up call for us all.

The current situation is nowhere near good enough, and the autism community deserves so much better. Autistic children and adults are a vibrant part of our community. They are our friends, neighbours, colleagues and family, and they deserve to have the same rights, support services and opportunities as every other person in Northern Ireland. They certainly should not be at a disadvantage because they are autistic. However, the current system is letting them down, and it is up to us as public representatives to change that. We cannot keep turning a blind eye to those very real issues. It is not fair and it is not right, and it is up to us to make the changes and make a more inclusive society for everyone.

**11.30 am**

We have a huge opportunity to make a real difference. I therefore hope that you will give my private Member's Bill the support that it needs when it finally progresses to its First Stage. It goes without saying that I absolutely support all the issues raised in today's motion.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** From this point on, Members will have five minutes each, although if they take an intervention, they will get an extra minute.

**Ms Hunter:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate in my role as my party's health spokesperson. I support the motion and the amendment, and I thank the Members who moved them.

This is an important and much-needed debate. The figures stated in the motion really do speak for themselves. I think that we all know or love someone who either has autism or, unfortunately, is waiting for a crucial

assessment. At the end of last year, almost 4,500 children in Northern Ireland were awaiting an autism diagnosis, which is shocking, and almost of one quarter of them were in the Western Trust, which falls into my constituency.

Personally, someone very close to me has the most wonderful son, who is of primary-school age and has been left without an assessment for over two years. I have witnessed first-hand how delays contribute to the detriment of a child's mental health, confidence and overall well-being and the real, tangible isolation that they feel in and outside the classroom.

Ahead of today's debate, Autism NI circulated a briefing to all Members, and it makes for stark and concerning reading. I thank Autism NI for its commitment to bettering the lives of those with an autism diagnosis and to supporting their families. The report includes the disparity in waiting times between the different trust areas and the health inequalities that are arising as a result of the waiting lists, with some families, as mentioned previously, able to afford a private diagnosis, while others simply cannot. That is a very sad reality when we note that an early assessment can help to shape the lives of people with autism and contribute to their living happy, healthy and independent lives.

**Mr McGrath:** I thank the Member for giving way. Many of those who have an autism diagnosis have a dual diagnosis with ADHD, and many people are also waiting for an ADHD diagnosis. I asked a question of the Department, and it would appear that the Department does not hold any records of the numbers of people who have been diagnosed with ADHD. Does the Member agree that, if there is to be a strategy and resources to challenge those conditions, we at least need to know how many people have them and where they live so that we can direct them to the services?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Ms Hunter:** Thank you. I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, I think that it is crucial to keep the numbers. I note that, in my constituency, a number of parents have raised the fact that it has been difficult to find support, especially during COVID-19.

I was particularly concerned to note that there has been an increase in the number of people with autism over the past 10 years, with one in 24 children of school age having a diagnosis. Nearly 20,000 people in Northern Ireland have

autism, which is one in every 100 people. The conversations that we have today have the power to change lives. That is really important.

I have spoken here on a number of occasions about the impact of COVID-19 on overall well-being. I think that our children are among the most affected, and I am deeply concerned about what it will all mean for them. I fear for children who may have been left behind when they were not in school over the pandemic and who may have autism but their teacher was not there to witness the signs and symptoms. I am sure that that adds a great sense of uncertainty not just for the children themselves but for their families and carers.

I call on the Minister and his Department, in conjunction with the Minister of Education, to work together through the Children's Services Co-Operation Act to bring forward a longer-term strategy and, in doing so, to work with those who have autism, their families and carers, and the community and voluntary sector to ensure equality of care and services that are free at the point of need.

To conclude, I would like to put on record my support and that of my party for those young people and their families. I hope that we will soon see a strategy forthcoming from the Department.

**Mr Chambers:** These past 15 months have been a difficult period for us all, but the pandemic has brought particular challenges both for young people and older people who ordinarily would have taken comfort from daily routine and structure. There is no doubt that autism services have never been under as much strain as they currently are, like so many parts of our health and social care system. However, they were already struggling long before COVID, and this is an issue that has transcended the terms of many Executive Ministers. For instance, in September 2016, when the current deputy First Minister was the Health Minister, 2,325 children were waiting for an autism spectrum assessment. Whilst that was, obviously, lower than it is today, the reality is that it was four times the number waiting, only five years before, in 2011.

It is clear that autism services, like so many other services, fell victim to a decade-long period of underinvestment and lack of strategic direction. Of course, many people with a diagnosis of autism still live life to the full and reach great heights and potential. The challenge is getting that initial diagnosis. It is widely accepted that early intervention is far more cost-effective, but, even more importantly,

it is beneficial for young people. Receiving a timely diagnosis can enable parents to better understand their child and ensure that they have access to crucial help and support. That is especially important because autism can often have a huge impact on family life. Delays often rob children and young people of the support that they need, and, if and when it does come, that support can be too little or too late.

We are all agreed that there is an undoubted problem. The current model of autism services is wholly unsustainable. That is what happens when demand far exceeds capacity. This is something that I have heard the Minister speak of before, so I know that he is acutely aware of it. The interim strategy, earlier this year, will, I hope, help, but what we need most is sustained investment to recruit additional permanent staff in order to improve the waiting list position. In the meantime, noting the disparity across trusts, perhaps an interim step could be the facilitation of the assessment of children in some trust areas being undertaken in other areas where the service is not under such pressure. This is a new approach that the Minister has already introduced for some other key services, so perhaps it is worth considering in the interim.

As I have said, I know that the Minister is acutely aware of the issues raised by this motion and the debate today. I am confident that he will be doing all within his power to seek improvement in delivery of autism services going forward. However, adequate, long-term and ring-fenced funding for our NHS has never been more vital than it is now. The Ulster Unionist Party will support this motion and the amendment.

**Ms Bradshaw:** First, I thank the proposer of the motion for tabling it today and for outlining the great difficulty that people are having in the wait for diagnostic assessments, the degree to which there is a postcode lottery and the objective of a longer-term co-design strategy. I do not see how anyone would have any difficulty with it. Secondly, I thank the proposer of the amendment. We feel that it delivers a greater degree of precision, both to the issue itself and to our ask in this motion. As the debate goes on, and possibly afterwards, I will be interested to hear more detail about what the independent body would be about, but I have no difficulty with it in principle.

The motion is timely because, of course, for people with autism and their families, the pandemic has been a disproportionately stressful experience. They have been impacted to a greater degree by isolation and loneliness, which, in itself, is a topic worthy of specific

intervention from the Executive. They have seen statutory requirements around support intentionally weakened by, in part, the emergency COVID legislation, and, in many cases, they have seen a seriously detrimental effect on their ability to work full time or to progress in education.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I hope that you will give me a little leeway to point out that a longer-term strategy will not be confined to the Department of Health, although, naturally, it will be the lead Department. On asking one family affected by autism for their views ahead of this debate, the response was immediate. They want improved pathways for school leavers. Specific support to get into employment and specific awareness-raising in the workplace, and even in leisure pursuits, would make a significant difference to people who live with autism. As I said in the recent debate on palliative care, not everything around autism or other conditions should revolve around healthcare appointments. It is about allowing people to live their lives to the full.

We should also be clear that we are not talking about some fringe issue. Over 4% of schoolchildren in Northern Ireland are known to have autism to a greater or lesser extent. The point is that this figure could be much higher if we were able to diagnose autism more effectively. We are seeing something which is sadly typical of what is now a two-tier health service. As with so many areas of health, those with means and money can go private and get a diagnosis far faster, thus being able to make the relevant adaptations and seek the relevant support earlier. This is not a service that is universal and free at the point of access. It is not universal if not everyone can access it, and it is not free at the point of access if, in practice, some can pay for a faster service. I repeat the point that I have made often: those who seek a universal health service free at the point of access need to recognise that this means not supporting but opposing the status quo, and instead supporting urgent and swift transformation, so that a family's income does not determine access.

That reinforces why it is essential to have in place the figure of 13 weeks. We have people with means who are able to move faster, but there is also a clear postcode lottery, as others have mentioned. A first appointment will take 10 weeks in the South Eastern Trust area, on the fringe of my constituency, yet people within that constituency will potentially wait over a year. Under the Autism Act, and indeed under the basic principles of universal health provision, how can that be acceptable? As a side note, I

support the Minister and Department of Health's move towards regional prioritisation waiting lists for some aspects of healthcare as we move through the pandemic. It is an approach that we should explore for other avenues of healthcare, not least this one.

The postcode lottery only complicates the crossover into ensuring adequate provision in schools, training for teachers, and support for pathways into employment, housing and so on. Let me emphasise that, when we speak of a diagnosis of autism, it should not be seen as a negative or thought of in terms of disadvantage, but rather in the joy of seeing diversity and difference.

I place on record my support and thanks to Sólás, which provides an amazing service for families in South Belfast; Autism Initiatives, for its great resource in Carryduff; and Autism NI, for its work in advocacy on this issue. I appeal directly to the Health Minister and the Executive to provide those organisations with adequate long-term funding. One of the groups I have just mentioned has 17 or 18 open funding programmes at the minute, and that is no way to run a service when you are trying to provide front-line support to children.

**Mr McHugh:** I offer my support to the proposers of the motion and the amendment.

Some time ago, I had my first meeting with a parent of a young adult who is autistic. I am sure that his condition would have been described as at the severe end of autism. He struggles daily, and so too do his mother, father and siblings in that home. His mother broke down in tears in my office as she described to me the daily struggle and the feelings of helplessness in dealing with it. She did not know where to turn, received no support, cried out for respite and was sick to death with worry, as she did not know what would be the future for her son in the event that she was no longer in the picture. That was such a concern for her.

The mother explained to me that this has always seemed to be the case.

She had to fight tooth and nail every step of the way throughout her child's schooling to get him what little support was available. Now, as he is a young adult, his needs are different. As parents, we know that, although they grow up, in many respects our children are just big children but with very different needs who constantly need the support of their parents. That young man's needs are different, and his mother is still fighting and facing the same insurmountable hurdles in her attempts to

attend not only to the needs of her son but to the needs of the family in coping with his condition.

**11.45 am**

My heart went out to that mother. As we talked through the issues, it became obvious that she was not alone in experiencing such a dearth in provision, so much so that it caused me to take an initiative. I posted on Facebook and held a Zoom meeting in order to look in particular at provision in West Tyrone, which is the constituency that I represent. I was inundated with enquiries from providers, parents and school representatives who all wished to join in the meeting. If I was moved during the first meeting that I had with that lady, I was not prepared for the intensity of the criticism from those who attended the Zoom meeting. I was shocked in every respect at what they outlined to me. They criticised the Health and Social Care Board, the Western Trust, the Department of Education and even our council for the lack of facilities that they provide for those who are autistic.

Diagnostic testing is one issue that has been highlighted today. Although there is much criticism of the lack of diagnostic testing and the fact that people very often have to pay for it, many of the people who I talked to said that the bodies that they dealt with recognised diagnostic testing as being the service when it should be only the very first step and the services should be provided on the basis of the result of a diagnostic test.

It is accepted, particularly in the case of autism, that early diagnostic testing is so important. I was glad to hear the comment that was made about a child of three years of age who had been tested. That should also be a primary objective in the system for our preschool children so that they have the same opportunity. The parent probably knows before the test is ever carried out that their child is autistic.

Parents identified a total lack of long-term planning and training for the workers who engage with those who have autism. Whether it was the Western Trust OTs or whoever, the parents felt that training was missing.

There is a lack of employment opportunities for those who have been diagnosed with autism. They go through the school system and come out the other end to, all of a sudden, find that there is no support service for them. Previously, employers were encouraged with support grants to employ people with autism —.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I am sorry, but the Member's time is up.

**Mr McHugh:** My apologies. I would like to very quickly get to the point, which is that society is judged by how it protects its most vulnerable. In our case, we are letting down those who have autism, and we should respond to that immediately.

**Mr McNulty:** I support the motion and the amendment. Let us imagine a world without people with autism. There would be no Sir Isaac Newton, no Hans Christian Andersen, no Charles Darwin, no WB Yeats, no Daryl Hannah, no Albert Einstein, no Mozart and no James Joyce. What a dull, boring, undiscovered, grey and dismal world it would be.

Autism is not a disease; it is a disability.

No one, let alone a child with a disability, should be disadvantaged or left behind by a state or system that is supposed to care for them, nurture them and support them.

As I speak on this important issue, I am proud of my south Armagh SDLP predecessors. Autism NI described the 2011 Act as:

*"the most comprehensive piece of single disability legislation in Europe".*

I acknowledge the great work of Dominic Bradley, a Bessbrook man, who brought forward that legislation with the support of others and the team in Autism NI. I also acknowledge Crossmaglen man John Fee, RIP, who was the first person to table a motion on autism in the Assembly. Sadly, though, there has been a failure by the Department of Health to implement the autism strategy and its subsequent action plans. The Autism Act 2011 is current and binding. It is the responsibility of the Executive to ensure that the autism strategy is fulfilled, that it is outcomes-based and that it can be measured and benchmarked. That has not happened. If we continue to fail children with autism, we continue to fail as a society.

My heart goes out to the Members who have described their personal experiences with autism. It is important to recognise that the impact of autism is not just on the child with autism; there is a ripple effect on their immediate and extended families, friends and neighbours. That ripple effect must be addressed, and that will come through doing the right thing for children and families who are dealing with autism. One in 24 school-age

children has autism: that is one in every class. Some 78% of those children are in mainstream education. Continuing to fail those children fails a large section of our society.

For a parent to seek help for their son or daughter is not easy. It can be trying or difficult for a parent to cope. However, meeting bureaucracy and brick walls only adds to the pain, the frustration and the sense of abandonment. Any parent will go to the ends of the earth to ensure that their son or daughter has everything that they need and deserve. They know that their son or daughter needs additional support, and they get justifiably frustrated when they are met only with delay after delay. Those who have the financial wherewithal then turn to the private sector for assessments. They do so out of sheer want to do the best for their children, and so they should, but what about the families and children who do not have the finances to go private? Therein lies the health inequality.

As a member of the Education Committee, I have heard many stories from advocacy groups such as Autism NI and the Children's Law Centre and educationalists. The Committee has had the Education Authority (EA) before it. To the EA's credit, it is implementing improvements, but it cannot do it alone; it needs more support.

As a constituency MLA, I have been contacted by many parents about their trials and frustrations in accessing services. The trust in my area is, to its credit, better than most, but I do not accept that that is the best that we can do. Parents and children deserve better, and we need to see significant changes. We need better and quicker access to diagnostic services and the support services that come with a diagnosis. We need a better, more joined-up approach across the system. We need to stop failing our young people with autism and their families. We need more support in education and healthcare and in supported employment opportunities. We need to recognise that young people with autism can rock the world and make it a better place, be it in music, the arts, science or literature. Let their only limitation be the limit of their ambition.

**Ms Armstrong:** I might not take my full five minutes. Everyone here acknowledges that we need to do better for people with autism. We need to do better for all people with disabilities.

In 2016, I had the privilege of sitting in the Public Gallery when my former colleague and predecessor, Kieran McCarthy, presented a petition signed by over 8,000 people asking for

more investment to deal with diagnoses and waiting lists. The then Health Minister, Simon Hamilton, allocated £2 million per year, and I am delighted that that funding has continued.

What has happened since then? How can we help you, Minister? Is there a need for a clear cross-cutting theme in the next Programme for Government to support all those with the various types of learning disabilities?

I am not here to talk about failing people with autism; I am here to talk about failing all of us, particularly our health workers. They face enormous waiting lists, and those waiting lists are getting bigger and bigger, because the better we are at diagnosing and recognising autism, the more people are being added to those lists.

How do we make improvements? As Mr Gildernew said, some health trusts are doing this better than others, so let us look at what they do differently. Autism NI and the National Autistic Society (NAS) have pointed out that there is a significant difference between rural and urban people and how diagnoses happen. Why is that? Why are rural people not able to get as many diagnoses? Is it because rural people do not get autism? We know that that is not the case. We need to think about that. Do we need more autism clinicians? A Member mentioned training. We need more training, because the people who are doing the job got into it because they wanted to help people. They want to cure people; they want to make them better. We need to give them the training to do that. We also need to increase the number of clinicians. Does that mean giving the Health Minister more money? What is the cost for all of us of late diagnoses? What does that cost society? What does it cost our education system? What has been achieved from the progress report? What has the autism strategy done? The commercial sector has, in fact, improved things a lot more than we have as politicians. Exploris, for instance, in my area, has an autism afternoon, and some supermarkets have autism times, when the lights are better and the sound is turned down for people who want to go in.

We all want early diagnosis to be uniform across all trusts, but we must not forget that it is not just children who have autism. Let us not forget the number of adults who are faced with issues on which other Departments do not seem to pick up. For instance, people who are going forward for personal independence payment (PIP) appeals are being presented with the option of a video or telephone appeal system. Honestly? Why is learning disability

treated so badly? Why are the systems not improved to meet the needs of people with autism and people with learning disabilities?

I do not envy the Minister. I say that because, even if the waiting lists were resolved, there would still be a massive issue. That is why I mentioned the Programme for Government. We can all say that we need this and we need that, but let us do it. Let us go back to the Programme for Government. Let us look at where we put the investment, and let us get a move on. How many times do we need to say that we are failing children with autism? We should be saying that we are making lives better for children with autism and looking at how we are getting to that point.

I support the motion's call for a longer-term autism strategy. I have no problem in supporting the amendment, but I ask the proposers of the amendment to confirm who the independent body is. Let us not take any money away from autism services by putting it into another body. Let us make sure that we invest in our young people and in the people in our health service who help them. Let us make sure that we change things. We cannot talk about this any more. I am delighted that a private Member's Bill is coming through on autism. The Autism Mummies, with whom I am in regular contact, cannot wait to see that. They have responded to Pam. We need £2 million a year to stand still. It is not working. We need more, so let us invest in it. Let us make it a key priority that people with learning disabilities and all types of disabilities are prioritised in the next Programme for Government.

**Ms Bailey:** I thank Kellie Armstrong. They were wise words. She made a sensible call, because it is alarming to see the length of time that some children wait for an autism diagnosis and even more alarming when you realise the disparity across the health trusts. We all have cases that we could raise or, perhaps, personal experiences to draw from — maybe both.

The waiting list debacle has been raised, the postcode lottery has been highlighted, the stats have been read out loud, and the overworked and overburdened organisations have been named, but, of course, the issue goes beyond the Department of Health and the waiting lists for assessments. I should not have to remind the Executive parties here that their Ministers have a duty placed on them by the Green Party's Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015.

Unfortunately, to date, we have seen little evidence of Departments working together to

deliver services aimed at children and young people, and the need for that to happen is so much greater when we are talking about autistic children and young people. Along with the Autism Act, the Children's Services Co-operation Act creates a clear legislative framework for the provision of effective autism services. Instead, however, we have developed a system in which it is a constant battle just to get the most basic interventions that children need.

## 12.00 noon

Over the years, we have all spoken to countless parents who are tired. They are tired, frustrated and angry, because every single step has been a struggle. They should not have to fight so hard for something that should be there. They have had to fight to get their children an assessment, to get them statemented, to get the right supports in place, to get help with school transition and to get adult services. The fight is never-ending. It is us who are failing children and their families. I note that the Minister of Health has brought forward an interim strategy for autism for 2021-22. Although it is welcome, it is simply not enough, and we all know that, including the Minister.

Delivering the services needed and responding to the calls made in the motion and the amendment will take the commitment of every Minister in the Executive, so please work with your own Ministers and get them to step up as well. We need the other Departments — Education, Economy, Communities, Justice — to swing into action and ensure the joined-up provision of services and supports. I am keen to hear from the Minister today about how those Departments are working together, in line with the Children's Services Co-operation Act, to deliver services that are needed. Young lives are at risk, and young lives are being lost. It is happening on our watch.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** No other Members have indicated to me that they wish to speak. I therefore call the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, to respond to the debate.

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** I welcome the proposal in the motion, that in the amendment and Members' contributions today. The debate provides me with an opportunity to acknowledge publicly that I am acutely aware of the considerable challenges being experienced by individuals and families on waiting lists for autism assessments. I remind Members that the situation is unfortunately not unique to autism. As recently as Tuesday 13 April, I made

a statement in the House in which I mentioned our "absolutely dire waiting lists". I said that the pandemic had highlighted fragilities in our health and social care system and acknowledged that one of the casualties is autism, which is being highlighted here today.

I realise that, if a child is waiting for an autism assessment for a significant length of time, that may impact on its emotional health and well-being, personal development and education. That is not acceptable. For the family of that child, it can impact on how they live, how they support their child and, indeed, any other children in the home, and all that without having the necessary information and, in a lot of cases, no additional support. That is not acceptable. For those adults who may have experienced lifelong challenges in their social interaction and in their ability to communicate and interact with their environment and who have taken the decision to seek assessment and obtain support that could make a positive difference to their life, that is not acceptable. That has been highlighted so many times by the personal and constituency examples and stories recounted by nearly all MLAs in today's debate.

I said in my statement on 13 April that we must put waiting lists right, and that includes for autism. In supporting individuals, children and families, we all have a responsibility to work together, which Ms Bailey's contribution highlighted. Given the prevalence of autism today, we should no longer expect autistic people, their families, and those awaiting assessment to adapt to society. We also have a collective responsibility to increase understanding and to prepare society to adapt to and understand the needs of children and adults with autism and their families.

Today's debate raises the question of bringing forward a longer-term autism strategy. I want to take this opportunity to share my rationale for publishing an interim strategy, setting out my immediate plans. I also want to advise how I intend to proceed with the development of a longer-term strategy that can provide actions that will make a difference to lives. Many of you are aware, and many have mentioned, that the Autism Act places a legislative requirement on my Department to prepare a cross-departmental autism strategy. That was mentioned by many Members today. Also mentioned was the pivotal and important role that education plays. The previous autism strategy came to an end in December 2020. Although it achieved much and significantly raised the profile of autism as a condition, there is a lot of work still to be done.

In preparation for the development of a revised strategy, the focus of my officials has been to listen to the voices of those who matter most: autistic people, their families and carers, and the community and voluntary sector that represents them and works tirelessly to provide advice and support. From that engagement, a clear sense emerged of the priorities that families and individuals wanted to see addressed through a strategy. Those priorities included Health and Education working more closely together, which was mentioned many times today, and we will do that; greater provision for early intervention and standardised regional services, with equity of access across the region, and we will strive to achieve that; accessibility to mental health services through a mental health strategy, and we will improve that; greater awareness and understanding of the needs of autistic people in our workforce, services, communities and families, and we will work in partnership with the relevant bodies to increase that understanding.

We were also told that actions, not words, were needed. To determine how priorities can be addressed, my officials participated in forums with health and social care clinicians, who are dedicated to providing support and interventions specific to individual needs. They heard first-hand about the challenges experienced with managing waiting lists and about how those clinicians are already working to improve that. My officials also worked across Departments, including Education, to determine how autistic people are being supported by and considered in the delivery of our services, as well as to identify actions that could make a real difference to their lives and to the lives of their families. Through participation in multi-agency autism forums in trust areas, they spoke to members of our local councils to hear more about the work being undertaken as they strive to become autism-friendly areas and about how public services are implementing actions to provide appropriate support.

That work, and much more, has demonstrated where my priorities for an autism strategy should lie. However, as we have said in so many debates and Question Times throughout the past year, no one could have prepared us for the impact that COVID-19 would have on our lives and on how services would have to be delivered. As the impact of the pandemic heightened and public guidelines and restrictions were put in place, autism services in our trusts had to take the difficult decision to cease delivery of elements of the autism assessment. There was no doubt in anyone's

mind that that would have a significant impact on waiting lists, which were already growing.

A crucial element of the autism assessment is built on observation. It is known as the autism diagnostic observation schedule (ADOS) and provides a structured, standardised method of assessment of communication, social interaction and behaviours. Throughout the pandemic, that assessment could not be delivered due to the social-distancing and public health guidance measures. As the assessment is undertaken in close proximity, the impact of PPE on the individual could render the assessment invalid.

Aware of the need to continue delivery of these services and that support, autism services in our trusts investigated alternative solutions, both nationally and internationally, to implement methods of assessment that would be compliant with the requirements of NICE guidance. I commend them for their efforts and commitment in implementing alternative methods of support and interventions through digital platforms, clinical helplines and provision of resources to all those in need, regardless of diagnosis or not.

However, the reality of the impact on waiting lists in some areas has been realised, and I have no doubt that the situation has influenced the tabling of the motion today, and understandably so. As I have previously said, all waiting lists must be addressed, and that includes those for autism, whether it is for an assessment or for the delivery of services and support to individuals and their families.

**Mr Chambers:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Swann:** I will.

**Mr Chambers:** Minister, how much more difficulty does a one-year Budget present to your Department in dealing with the long-term challenges that you are trying to address?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. It does present challenges. Kellie Armstrong clearly demonstrated in her contribution how the challenges that Health has, or that members of our society have, with what has happened over the past year have been additionally compounded by that one-year Budget. It is no fault of this House. It is no derogation of the responsibility of this House. I have heard, from every party in this Chamber, their commitment to a recurrent Budget, if not for everywhere then especially for Health, to allow us to address that.

Throughout the past year, we have all had to change our routines and the way in which we live our lives. The stark reality of how this impacts on people who may have been diagnosed with autism or who are waiting on assessment has been drawn to my attention in this House by many Members on many occasions. The routines and structures that provide coping mechanisms for many — schools, familiar locations and people and, of course, respite care and short breaks — were all withdrawn or limited at a time when families experienced great need. Whilst these were difficult and, for many, unpopular decisions, we all know that they were vital to control the spread of the virus and protect everyone in society, especially our most vulnerable.

Whilst I am aware of the pressures on our health and social care systems as we address the emerging priorities of the pandemic, I am also aware that, as a result, the development of a new long-term autism strategy for implementation has been severely constrained. In considering options, I was mindful of the challenges that had been experienced by children, adults and their families throughout the pandemic. I was conscious of the efforts placed upon identifying the priorities and actions that had been identified in preparation for the development of an autism strategy. I wanted to enable a direction of travel to be set as we rebuild our services.

I also wanted to acknowledge the voices of the people who had contributed so much to influencing and shaping the outcomes that the strategy will set out to achieve. Therefore, I took a decision to publish an interim autism strategy to set out priorities for outcome-based actions for 2021 and 2022 that will align with the Programme for Government. Again, I thank Kellie Armstrong and Clare Bailey for their offers of support and encouragement — and that was received from all Members across the House — on how we do this, not just as Health alone but with all of us working together to support those who need it most. To do that, I wrote to my Executive colleagues and our Health Committee in October 2020 to advise them of my intention to bring together the outcomes of the preparatory work and engagement undertaken in the publication of an interim strategy, which would ultimately inform the development of a fully co-produced autism strategy to commence later in 2021. That would ensure that the implementation of actions would not be delayed at a time when need has never been greater, and I can assure you that I am committed to that and that those plans are commencing.

You will be aware that the vision of the interim strategy is to respect, to listen and to involve. In underpinning my commitment to the inclusion of autistic people, their families and carers and our community and voluntary representatives in shaping and developing the strategy, my Department has established an autism forum. That forum met for the first time on 28 April to determine its role, and further engagement is planned to determine our focus for a longer-term strategy, how we will work in partnership to develop and co-produce that and how we will monitor and evaluate the actions emerging from it.

My officials will present the options that emerge from the forum to me, and I assure Members that, when plans are in place, I will keep the House apprised.

### 12.15 pm

I understand, in publishing the strategy, that Members and the public that we serve will expect a road map to improvement: that is what we all want to see. However, in the current climate, we must also manage our expectations of what can be achieved. Whilst we are optimistic that we are heading into a more positive climate that we hope to be able to refer to as "post-COVID", our services must recover and rebuild. The interim strategy sets the plans for our actions in motion and provides a direction of travel as we emerge into a post-pandemic world. My officials will continue to keep the work under review.

In recent weeks, media attention has highlighted the lengths to which many families have gone in seeking private assessment in light of our current waiting lists for autism assessment. While that is a personal decision for some families, it is a prohibitive one for many. I do not want systems and services where families feel that they must take that route: I want equity in our systems. I want equity in services that are free, based on need and accessible to all. I want children to have the best start in life and to get the support that they need and the education that they deserve, not one that is dependent on or defined by a diagnosis. I want individuals — children and adults — and their families to feel supported, included and understood in the communities in which they live. It is not just about waiting lists and services but about building a longer-term vision in which we respect others and work together to bring about change in the outcomes for good.

**Mr Buckley:** I do not rise to add to the debate, because Members across the Chamber have spoken eloquently in their desire to tackle the growing crisis in autism waiting lists in Northern Ireland. I thank the Members who tabled the motion and those who have indicated support for the amendment.

The statistics speak in their own right. Everybody has touched on a different statistic that can alarm us all. For me, the key statistic was the prevalence of autism in our most deprived communities — 37% higher than the Northern Ireland average — which goes right to the heart of what we aim to address through the motion. When we combine the autism statistics from a pre-COVID environment with waiting lists that have been compounded by COVID, the statistics are startling. At 31 December 2020, 4,495 children were waiting for an autism assessment. Members have rightly put on record ways in which we can address those disturbing statistics. The postcode lottery in the provision of services, both rural and urban, that has been mentioned should also be seen to be addressed by the House.

We fully endorse the aim of the motion, which is to address the rising inequalities in care and services for children with autism in Northern Ireland. However, we need to see much more than another toothless or aspirational strategy. We need practical and immediate solutions to the mounting number of autism assessments and care inequalities. I thank the Minister for his comments about ways in which the Department can help to address those in the immediate term. There needs to be a clear and detailed road map for clearing the backlog of autism assessments across all trusts. The delays cause undue stress, distress and uncertainty to each child and family involved, who wait to receive tailored support. We must see ambitious time frames for addressing those waiting lists.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Member for giving way. The amendment calls for a longer-term strategy, to which the Member has just referred. Most Members have indicated that, primarily, that would involve the Health and Education Departments.

However, is there not another very important part of the jigsaw that is missing? We really need to see investment and the Finance Minister playing his part to address the problem along with the Health and Education Ministers.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member will be pleased to hear that, because we are running ahead, I can give him an extra minute.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Principal Deputy Speaker. I agree with the point raised by my colleague. Clare Bailey put on record the need for that joined-up approach. If we are to deal with this in the long-term way that Members envisage and see the need for, there will have to be that joined-up approach. We have to recognise that it is an issue not just for Health but for every Department, including Education, Finance, Communities and even DAERA, as mentioned, given the disparity between rural and urban. There is a part for them all to play in ensuring that we cater for people right across our communities in dealing with the scourge of autism and helping them to come forward and receive the support that they need. There was mention of notable people with autism, some of whom I did not even realise were people with autism, who have contributed to and played a fantastic role in our society and had a real impact on Northern Ireland and, indeed, the world.

There can be no substitute for face-to-face assessment. Whilst digital solutions and weekend appointments can reduce some of the delays, that should not take away from the need to progress systematic improvements in how we approach autism and those who are waiting for an assessment. The debate is whether a strategy or legislation is best suited to making those improvements. It is deeply worrying that parents and families have felt it necessary to pay for private provision in order to receive a diagnosis. That creates further inequalities, particularly given, as I mentioned, the higher prevalence of autism in deprived areas. As the Committee Chair mentioned at the start, the guiding principle of the NHS, which is its being free at the point of need, must be restored for our autistic population. Members right across the House can agree on that.

We need to seriously question whether the interim strategy is fit for purpose to deliver the necessary results, given the new and unprecedented challenges presented by the pandemic. Changes cannot wait until the next scheduled evaluation. The Minister needs to follow through on his pledge that every child, diagnosed or undiagnosed, receives equitable access to the practical support that they desperately need, and he outlined that. We urge the Minister to bring forward legislative proposals to enhance current statutory provision. Those should include establishing a cross-departmental independent scrutiny mechanism, developing and funding a cross-

departmental NI autism training strategy, providing training, providing an early intervention service, providing an autism information service and helpline and meeting the needs that adults with autism and autistic adults have in terms of lifelong learning, employment support, recreation, emotional and mental well-being and supported living.

As time is eluding me, I thank Members for their contributions and urge them to support the amendment.

**Ms Brogan:** First, I thank my colleague Colm Gildernew for proposing the motion and Pam Cameron for her amendment, which I will support. I also thank all Members for their contributions. I am glad to say that there has been widespread support for the motion.

I declare an interest in the topic. A family very close to me is going through this process, and I can see at first-hand their frustration and exhaustion and the fact that they are having to fight so hard just to get a diagnosis. It is worth remembering that a diagnosis is just the beginning of the process for a child or adult with autism and that they will need support services after that. It is really disheartening and frustrating for families to face all those hurdles at the very beginning of the process, so I am really glad that we are having the debate.

In winding on the motion, I will not summarise each individual's remarks, but I will touch on some of the main points that have been highlighted. The main one is the lack of access to diagnostic services for children and adults with autism. As we said, it is just not good enough. We heard about the waiting times, with some of them being up to three years. That is not good enough. The current system is letting down our children and adults with autism and their families. It is simply unacceptable that some families are paying up to £1,400 for an assessment for autism. That is unfair, and it creates a two-tier health service and further disparities.

Most Members mentioned that we need a cross-departmental focus and approach to an autism strategy to tackle those issues. I completely agree with that.

In my capacity as a member of the Education Committee and as Sinn Féin spokesperson on children and young people, I will focus my remaining remarks on the educational needs of children and young people, particularly those with autism.

According to the Department of Health's monitoring report of May 2020, one in 24 children in the North receives a diagnosis of autism. Their journey through education and how they are supported on that journey are crucial to ensuring that those children have access to the same opportunities as their peers. Statistics suggest that 25% of those presenting with a diagnosis of autism will have an accompanying learning disability.

The challenges that those children face must be met with an ambitious strategy that incorporates their health, social and educational needs. Our education system is only one piece of the puzzle in supporting children with autism. In the absence of a timely diagnosis, it cannot support or deliver for those children. MLAs across the Chamber said that they had heard from distressed families who are at their wits' end after waiting for up to three years for an autism diagnosis.

Alongside my colleague Maolíosa McHugh, I have spoken to a range of families in my constituency of West Tyrone. They have been left frustrated, angry, upset and exhausted. They have, ultimately, given up hope because they have waited so long for an assessment.

As of April 2021, the Western Trust had 1,099 children waiting for appointments, with the longest wait being 720 days, yet families in the Southern Trust wait less than the recommended maximum of 13 weeks. As has been asked today, why is there such disparity between trust areas? Why should one family wait up to two years, sometimes three, for an assessment simply because of where they live? It is unfair. It is unfair on parents and families who want the best for their child and on the child who deserves to have their needs met.

When it comes to supporting and developing our children, we hear time and time again that early intervention is critical. The system fails countless children with autism and their families from the outset. We need to fix that. We need to ensure that early intervention is embedded in the health and social care system and the education system.

Key to the success of any strategy for supporting people with a diagnosis of autism is accountability. The Public Accounts Committee recently published a report on the Audit Office's 'Impact Review of Special Educational Needs' in the North. One of its conclusions was startling. It concluded that despite the vast sums — up to £1.3 billion over five years — spent, neither the Education Authority nor the

Department of Education could demonstrate value for money in that expenditure.

Agencies and Departments cannot simply throw money at special educational needs. Our children deserve strong, accountable leadership that offers a strategic vision of how they will be supported in their education journeys. While Health may take the lead on delivering the strategy, it must be done in collaboration and partnership with Education and others.

The meaningful involvement of children with autism, their families, carers and others in developing policy and services is critical. From an education perspective, some pressing issues could be resolved in the interim, which would have a positive impact on the school experience of children with autism and their families. The Education Committee recently heard shocking testimony about the use of restraint and seclusion in schools. The lack of statutory guidance on the monitoring and recording of such incidents in schools was even more worrying.

I am very pleased that the Department of Education published interim guidance yesterday on the use of restraint and seclusion and on how incidents are monitored and recorded. I thank the parents and advocates who worked tirelessly and campaigned relentlessly to ensure that the guidance was updated. I know that their work is not done, but I take the opportunity to say "Well done".

Last year, the Assembly supported a motion on mandatory autism and special educational needs training for school staff. That was touched upon throughout the debate. Some weeks ago, the Education Committee received a briefing from Autism NI, which also supports calls for mandatory autism training in schools. Our teachers and school staff want to be equipped with the necessary skills to support children with autism. The Education Minister should update us on his plans to act in accordance with that motion.

I am sure that many Members have heard accounts from teachers who struggle to manage classrooms without additional resources or appropriate training. In supporting people with autism, we must support them from the earliest possible moment. That is why Education as well as Health must take a prominent role in the development of a longer-term strategy in this area.

**12.30 pm**

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

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes with deep concern that, by the end of 2020, almost 4,500 children across health and social care trusts were awaiting a diagnostic assessment for autism, with some reportedly waiting more than two years, which exceeds the autism assessment standard of 13 weeks from the point of the initial referral; recognises the distress and harm that this places on those awaiting diagnosis and tailored support services, as well as on their families; expresses its concern at the growing inequality of access to autism services and diagnosis; further notes the stark difference in waiting times across health and social care trusts; and calls on the Minister of Health to bring forward a longer-term strategy that sets out measurable targets against which its successes may be assessed by an independent body, to be progressed urgently in partnership with those with autism, their families, carers and community and voluntary sector organisations, to ensure equality of care and services that are free at the point of access and based on need.*

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments to allow the relevant Minister and Members to get into the Chamber for the next debate.

## **Strategies to Protect Peatlands and Woodlands**

**Mr McGrath:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly pays tribute to the heroic efforts by those emergency service personnel from across these islands and the local community who responded to the recent wildfires in the Mournes; notes the importance of preserving the natural environment for improving air quality, biodiversity, carbon capture and combating the climate emergency; further notes the importance of both rewilding and protecting peatlands in tackling the climate emergency; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to produce fully resourced strategies and implementation plans to protect, preserve and enhance our peatlands and woodlands without further delay.*

**Mr 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 in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

**Mr McGrath:** I am delighted to propose today's motion. As an MLA for the constituency of South Down, I know only too well the importance of protecting our peatlands and woodlands and the dangers of wildfires. Those elements must form part of our response to the ongoing climate emergency. Daily, in my constituency, we stand in awe of the Mountains of Mourne. That mountain range is rich in biodiversity, flora and fauna. Every year, countless people make their way from all parts of the world to visit the mountains to enjoy the stunning vistas that they provide and to explore the untamed expanse. That natural wonder has inspired much art and literature. Today, visitors to the area help drive the local economy. The Mournes are an essential part of the North's tourism product, so it is essential that the peatlands and woodlands there be protected, enhanced, where possible, and preserved for future generations to enjoy.

The island of Ireland was once renowned for its beautiful, plentiful peatlands, although it must be said that such connection with the earth rather shamefully formed part of generations of anti-Irish stereotyping and prejudice. That connection with the land was essential, however. That type of wetland can store more carbon than similarly sized patches of forest when left intact. Ireland's raised bogs have dwindled to just 1% of the area that they used to cover. Peat was once used as a means of heat, but it is estimated that such sources in the South will be depleted entirely by 2028. Rewetting of the peatlands is needed, just as rewilding of our landscape is. We recognise that attempts to rewild such areas can, at times, prove unpopular. Given that 72% of land in the South and 75% of land in the North is farmland, the tension between economic stability and environmental diversity and protection is evident.

In my constituency, we are fortunate to have a local charity, True Harvest Seeds, that is right at the front of protecting, enhancing and preserving flora that is native to the island of Ireland. That is such a noble endeavour and one that I fully support. If we again look to the South, we see that, along the west coast of Ireland, there exists a scheme whereby public funding is given to farmers who will then manage conservation projects, such as wildlife habitat restoration, on their own land. It is not rocket science. It takes some inspired thinking,

but it is not beyond the realms of possibility. Rewilding our landscape is possible.

The recent wildfire in my constituency has brought back into public focus the need to address the issue of wildfires once and for all, given how they impede not just rewilding but already wild landscapes. While it is disheartening that it has taken that recent fire to revive interest in the matter, I am glad that we are now finally able to have the debate. What has taken us so long? Back in 2016, when he was Minister of the Environment, my colleague Mark Durkan not only raised £1.25 million from the carrier bag levy but was able to provide £125,000 to boost natural environment initiatives, which included an initiative on how we address wildfires. The following year, in 2017, through DAERA, an international seminar, the first of its kind to be held on the island of Ireland, was hosted in Newry so that we could better understand wildfires in order to prevent them in the future. What was the ministerial response? What was the follow-up from the announcement? Much like every other failed opportunity in that period, there was no response, because the institutions had been felled and ministerial responsibility had been abandoned. Inaction and missed opportunity went hand in hand. Think of what we could have achieved following that pioneering international seminar had the two parties that led the Government not abdicated their responsibility and had instead worked in the best interests of public health, public safety and, indeed, the public purse.

The facts are undeniable. Major wildfires used to happen once every four years, but they now take place every year and, sometimes, numerous times throughout the year. As our dry seasons become drier and longer, we could soon witness wildfires on the island of Ireland on the scale of those recently seen in Australia. What we see with such fires is that, even when the fire has been extinguished, enough heat has been transferred underground, where it remains, and the chance of future fires only increases. That has a direct impact on any chance of survival for our flora and fauna. Something needs to change. We cannot keep sending our emergency services in to deal with wildfires, endangering their lives and reacting to landscape that is becoming even more scarred and barren.

I put on record my total support and thanks to the firefighters from Newcastle and beyond who fought the recent fires. It was exceptionally physical and gruelling work — often literally a hand-to-hand fight between the firefighters and the fire. Yet they carried it out and preserved as

much of the landscape up there as they could. We are indebted to them for what they did.

It is possible to deliver on the green agenda when political leaders show leadership. Mark Durkan did it in 2016, and Minister Mallon has been doing it consistently since she took over Infrastructure, so perhaps the two leading parties of government, although late to the party, will live up to their ministerial responsibilities. We need to identify and resource better methods of land management than just burning, although I will not go as far as the MP for South Down and refer to such land managers — his voters — as environmental arsonists. Leadership is required not just in our actions but in our words. We must take action now to prevent wildfires and to encourage ecological recovery from these events.

Rewilding the land is not a throwback to the old stereotypes of Ireland and her people; rather, it is a vision for the future, one in which we celebrate our rich and vibrant biodiversity and recognise that we share this island not only with one another but with a range of biodiversity. That is why, today, the SDLP calls on the Environment Minister to introduce resourced strategies to protect our woodlands and peatlands from destruction. Such strategies should include the additional regulation of sensitive areas so that re-wetting and cutting are the methods of choice for land managers.

There can be no more inaction and no more missed opportunities. Quite simply, we must act now. That is why I am happy to propose the motion and commend it to the House.

**Mr Irwin:** The motion has been brought into sharp focus following the deliberately started blazes on the Mourne Mountains, which is an area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB) and one of Northern Ireland's most prized tourist attractions. I am sure that I speak for everyone in the House when I say that we were horrified at the scenes of the mountainside in flames. There has been much concern from the public about the damage and the long recovery period for that important ecosystem. I urge a redoubling of efforts by everyone who wishes to visit the Mournes and similar habitats to understand the dangers posed by simple acts such as dropping a cigarette butt or lighting a campfire or barbecue close to vegetation that is dry and has the potential to ignite.

It is important that public bodies increase publicity and awareness of the dangers. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the emergency services and the local community in the Mournes area, who played a significant role in

dealing with a rapidly evolving situation. I, again, thank the emergency services for their sterling work in extinguishing the fire and preventing even further widespread damage to the Mourne Mountains.

There is much value, merit and benefit to the climate and to people generally from the preservation and nurturing of those natural resources, and I fully agree about the need for them to be protected. According to the soil map, 24.6% of Northern Ireland is covered in peat: about 242,622 hectares. Woodland and forest cover stands at about 8% of land, which, when compared with the UK at 13% and the Republic of Ireland at 11%, shows that we have some way to go in Northern Ireland to match that resource. Our current woodland resource is in the region of 113,000 hectares, and the Minister has launched the Forests for our Future initiative, which seeks to see 18 million trees planted here over the next 10 years.

Minister Poots has started on the front foot in that regard. Indeed, his climate change Bill is in process and contains many important requirements and initiatives to assist the Province in protecting the environment and the contribution of Northern Ireland to reducing overall global emissions, to which Northern Ireland currently contributes 0.04%. I urge every party and Member to get behind the work of the Minister.

### 12.45 pm

As we know, woodlands and peatlands are very useful carbon sinks and natural storage facilities. It is vital that they are protected and, indeed, enhanced in order to continue to provide that very important function. The issue is that, if they are not looked after and tended to correctly, they lose that important value as a carbon store and actually become part of the problem. That must be avoided and reversed.

On 2 March, during Minister Poots's statement to the House, I asked him about the specific issue of utilising government- and council-owned land for tree-planting. He agreed that that represented a sensible way forward. That option is important as it removes a significant cost from the initiative. As many public bodies and agencies, such as Northern Ireland Water, have vast swathes of land, it could be ideally suited to that purpose. I understand that those realistic options will be pursued by the Minister; he has already commenced work in that regard.

To that end, there is much work ongoing in regards to the basis of the motion that is before

the House today. I look forward to seeing more progress on that important work in the weeks ahead, especially around the publication of a peatland strategy. I said in the House yesterday that we must be mindful of the impacts of any strategy around climate change. When it comes to this motion and the issue of rewilding, we must ensure that, ultimately, it provides the response that is required to address the concerns around climate change and that those who farm the land and are custodians of it are not left disadvantaged. That will be avoided through well-thought-out, sensible proposals. I support the motion.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** There was some interference with the microphones, but it is OK now.

**Mr McAleer:** I welcome today's motion. Like everybody else in the Chamber, I want to be identified with paying tribute to our emergency service personnel across all of Ireland who were involved in tackling the wildfires that ravaged the Mournes and the Killarney National Park. I also pay tribute to the local community that assisted in that very gallant effort. More than 100 firefighters were involved in the operation in the Mournes; it took three days to bring the fire under control. We see how those fires spread. They cause untold damage to our environment and wildlife, and they are a substantial risk to life and property. In addition, as has been pointed out, the wildfires pose a risk to our drinking water.

The wildfires in the Mournes were declared a major incident by our fire service. I am told that the scale of the devastation extends to more than 3.5 kilometres. We are aware that that fire may have been started deliberately, which is very frustrating and angering. The National Trust says that it will take years for the landscape to recover. Unfortunately, I have some experience of that in my own part of the world, in west Tyrone: in the Murrins area of special scientific interest (ASSI), there was a fire last year that devastated 150 hectares. I know from first-hand experience about the very serious ecological and human impact that that has on local communities, biodiversity and natural habitats.

Wildfires have a devastating impact on so many levels. From the environmental perspective, although the green shoots of recovery happen very quickly, the richness of the biodiversity and habitats takes years to recover, if it ever does. In the Murrins ASSI, which was impacted by the blaze last year, we have bog mosses, cotton grass, bogbean, tall heather, cross-leaved heath, tall bog-sedge, crowberry and much

more. We have a rich biodiversity. Of course, for wildlife, that becomes a habitat. Although the green shoots have come back, the richness of the biodiversity is simply not there. It will take years to restore.

The economic impact is huge as well. There are many landowners in my part of the world, and, I am sure, everywhere, who have had their land and their fencing and posts destroyed.

A neighbour of mine who is a farmer lost 3 km of fencing as well as gateposts, fixtures and fittings; indeed, had it not been for the Fire Service, the local community and local farmers who used their slurry tanks for water to help to contain the blaze, that farmer would have lost their house as well. It is frustrating. The people who are impacted find that getting compensation is difficult because there is a huge onus on them to provide proof that it was done by a proscribed organisation or by a group of three or more individuals. That comes at a huge cost. To be fair, the Department is good at getting its force majeure applications in, so at least they are not out for that loss, but it is frustrating for them to have to carry the burden of the cost of that fencing and the cost of the associated fixtures and fittings. I raised that with the Minister last year and, again, the force majeure did happen.

I commend the idea of a peatlands strategy. However, when it comes to a strategy, in responding to such wildfires it is hugely important that the local community works in partnership with the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS); indeed, just a couple of years ago, I hosted a seminar in Gortin with the Fire and Rescue Service and local farmers, which was headed up by the Fire Service's lead wildfire officer, to discuss a partnership model. Local communities and farmers will know back roads and bóithríns and, maybe, the ways to the source of a blaze that the Fire Service might not be able to get to. They can play a part in the peripheral aspects of such fires. In my case, when the fire happened down our way last year, the community association was able to divert traffic on local roads to prevent people coming to look at the fire, which was blocking the roads for the Fire Service. It is important that any strategy also has that aspect of involving the local community centrally in partnership with the Fire Service in helping to deal with those matters.

To conclude, as we approach the summer season, I make the call that people need to think seriously about the potential implications of their actions in starting those fires, either by accident or deliberately. The potential risks to

life and property, farm businesses, natural habitats and the environment are absolutely huge.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to contribute to the debate, which I welcome. I also thank the proposer of the motion.

Watching the wildfires spreading across the Mourne just over two weeks ago was a heartbreaking sight for us all. At the outset, I record my and my party's thanks to everyone who assisted with controlling and fighting the fires, including Fire Service personnel, DAERA staff from the Forest Service and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the PSNI, the UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency, the Irish Coast Guard and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, along with the local residents, community activists and businesses. It was extremely dangerous for the people involved in tackling the fire, and it was particularly devastating for the environmental conservation of an area that is significantly rich in its quality and diversity of habitats and is populated with plant and animal species that are extremely rare, scarce and limited. We really must look at the protection and preservation of such areas.

Of course, we must do more. Some of my experiences have been that some of our agencies have acted more as enforcers against farmers and landowners, while they could achieve more, perhaps, by acting as advisers. I am most certainly not saying that that should be a reason or an excuse for such destruction — definitely not — but it is unfair to designate land and farm areas with specific protection legislation without having an appropriate discussion with the farmers and the landowners.

While more and better advice to farmers and landowners is important, an education process and, at times, an improved enforcement mechanism is required for the wider public and the users of such locations. We are blessed in Northern Ireland to have many renowned locations that are rich in their environmental quality, and many of those areas are known throughout the world. It is therefore vital that those who use such locations do so with responsible behaviour. We want the public to enjoy the beauty and experience of our natural habitats in this beautiful countryside. Yes, by all means, enjoy it, but please do not destroy it. Many of those areas have served our community and society for generations, and many are improving in their quality, but, when a fire such as the one in the Mourne happens, it destroys years and decades of natural habitat

and growth and the development of important species.

A combination of management, protection, advice, education and enforcement is required. All have their place in developing a way forward, but they must be directed at the proper methods in an overall strategy. We must work collectively with all the agencies, landowners, local people and the public to ensure the protection of such important areas for our community.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** As it is now 12.56 pm and the Business Committee is due to meet at 1.00 pm, I propose to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the next item will be questions to the Minister of Education. When we return to this debate, the first Member to speak will be Mr John Blair. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.56 pm.*

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

**2.00 pm**

## **Oral Answers to Questions**

### **Education**

#### **Education Transformation Programme: Closure**

1. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Education why he has closed the education transformation programme. (AQO 2018/17-22)

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** I thank the Member for her question. The transformation programme was an innovative approach to policy and operational review developed by departmental officials in April 2018. It was established in anticipation of the return of the Assembly and for discussion with an incoming Minister. Work across a number of areas was progressed to good effect until the point at which I had to divert departmental staff resources to deal with the significant work associated with the pandemic. Following advice from officials, I took the decision to formally close the programme in March 2021 on the basis that there is no guaranteed funding stream for 2021-22 or beyond.

I would like to make it clear that this in no way means an end to transformation activity in the Department. The formal closure of the programme means only that further elements of transformation will be delivered using a different approach. I am keen that policy reform and service delivery improvements continue to be made wherever there is clear and evident need. Some aspects of the transformation programme have already been delivered, and others are continuing as planned, such as the work on an approach to a 14-19 education and training strategy. Other ongoing transformative work includes the scoping of proposals to provide flexibility for school starting age; work to address teacher concerns about workloads and accountability; and a programme of improvement in the Education Authority (EA) relating to services for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN).

Finally, the work of the panel on underachievement and the forthcoming independent review of education are further opportunities to transform our system and improve outcomes for children and young

people. I repeat that the closure of the programme does not mean the end of transformation; rather, it will be delivered in a different manner.

**Ms Armstrong:** Thank you, Minister. Given the increasing pressures that schools face because of their budgets, can you outline to us whether the common funding formula, which is a key part of that, has ceased? If not, where is it being dealt with, and where can we access updated information on that?

**Mr Weir:** I take the Member's point about the common funding formula. A summary of proposals on that is being prepared by officials. The problem that we tend to see with the common funding formula is that, unless there is a commitment from the Executive or others to provide additional funding, there is a fight over whether we are taking money out of one school and putting it into another. Ideally, there should be greater funding across the board. The detail of that is being drawn together by officials. Some schools — for example, those operating on split sites — will have concerns about whether there is adequate funding. I visited one of those schools yesterday. It is about assessing what information has been gathered not only for the short term but for the wider review of education as a whole. The review may well have comments to make directly on how we apply funding to make sure that we get the best possible results from any investment.

**Ms Ennis:** Like Kellie Armstrong, I want to ask about the common funding scheme. This is important work, particularly in the context of the recent Audit Office report on how special educational expenditure targets disadvantage. When does the Minister expect the review to conclude, and when does he expect to present the final report on the common funding scheme?

**Mr Weir:** There will be elements to do with what resources are applied. There are a number of strands to this, and you mentioned SEN in particular. Of course, the ongoing review of the EA is part of that, and that is looking at where SEN funding is applied. I anticipate that the final report of the educational panel on underachievement will be available by roughly the end of this month. The report will, I think, look at funding issues, along with other aspects. Again, we want to make sure that there is the best possible delivery of that. The problem is that, in any form of reassessment of where common funding should go, everybody assumes that their school or sector is hard done by and will benefit from it.

The issue is that, unless additional resources are provided for schools as a whole, it will be a question of gains for some and losses for others. There may be an equitable basis on which that can be justified, but we want to avoid a situation of schools fighting among themselves as to whether they have been treated equitably.

**Miss Woods:** The Minister outlines a number of transformative actions that the Department has undertaken, and he mentions funding. A recent Audit Office report found that the Education Department:

*"is unable to demonstrate the effectiveness of its two main funding interventions, accounting for almost £102 million per annum ... to address the educational attainment of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds".*

In light of that, why has the Department failed to introduce adequate arrangements to assess the effectiveness of the interventions and whether they contribute to achieving the required outcomes?

**Mr Weir:** There is obviously a link between social deprivation and educational underachievement, and that topic will be covered by the panel report. I will present that report to the Assembly, in accordance with procedure, but it has to be adopted first by the Executive.

It is sometimes difficult to ascribe a direct linear assessment of particular interventions to individual factors. However, targeting social need by, for example, the use of extended schools has played a significant role in helping to support socially deprived pupils. It is sometimes difficult to assess the extent of hypothecation. We will look to the recommendations of the expert panel on educational underachievement. We need to balance what is appropriate to ensure that money is spent properly and does not put too much of an additional administrative burden on the schools themselves. It is about trying to find an appropriate balance between the two.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I should have advised Members earlier that question 8 has been withdrawn.

## **Strule Shared Education Campus: Progress**

2. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made on the development of the Strule Shared Education Campus in Omagh. (AQO 2019/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for his question. The Department continues to work closely with the six school principals and their teams to build on the culture of sharing in Omagh, albeit within a challenging environment as schools continue to recover from and adapt to ongoing disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The previous procurement competition for the final phase of construction, which was to build five post-primary schools and shared facilities, has been formally closed, and the Department is working to progress the campus to the next stage in the procurement process with a revised strategy. Campus construction is planned to complete in 2025.

The Strule site has been cleared and constructed to formation level in preparation for moving to the next stage of construction. Liaison is ongoing with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council on the Department's planning application for the proposed development works on Gortin Road and Mountjoy Road.

Work is ongoing to reconfirm the previously agreed memorandum of agreement with the Education Authority and trustee bodies of the schools moving to the Strule campus. The document sets out the proposed arrangements for the occupation, governance and management of the campus, particularly the shared facilities and delivery of the educational benefits.

Given the scale of the investment, the educational benefits are vital to the success of the campus. A long-term benefits realisation plan has been agreed with the schools. A project plan and business case detailing the work required to realise the educational benefits and to pilot various shared education initiatives prior to the "go live" is under development by the Education Authority, which is managing the development of the educational model for the campus.

The vacated sites working group is considering how best to plan for and manage the future use and/or disposal of the existing sites following relocation to the campus, and it will contribute to Fermanagh and Omagh District Council's local government development plan and the Omagh opportunity sites task force.

**Mr T Buchanan:** Thank you, Minister, for the update. As the Minister knows, this has been an

ongoing issue for some time, and we are keen for it to be brought forward, perhaps at a quicker pace, and to get the diggers on-site in order that the project is brought to completion.

The Minister mentioned vacated sites. Will he indicate what discussions have been going on or outline any plans for those vacated school sites when the campus is completed?

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for his question and comments. We are all keen and the Executive as a whole share that keenness to see action taken on the site. We are talking about a large amount of public money, and that, by its nature, means that things are maybe not moving as quickly as they should.

The Members asked about the vacated sites. As he is aware, as well as Arvalee special school, five post-primary schools are relocating to the campus. Two of the sites are owned by the Education Authority, while three are owned by trustee organisations. Ultimately, it is for the owners of the sites to decide on their disposal. In recognition of the significance of the vacated school sites to Omagh town, the Department established a vacated sites working group in November 2016. The working group comprises members representing the site owners and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, as well as representation from relevant Departments. The working group is actively considering how best to plan for and manage the future use or disposal of the existing school sites. Site-specific disposal strategies have been prepared as a first step in determining plans for the sites' future use. Those plans will always be developed in line with and feed into the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council local development plan and the Omagh opportunity sites task force. There is a strong level of local awareness and a need for local buy-in as we move forward with the vacated sites.

**Ms Brogan:** I thank the Minister for his answer and the update on the Strule Shared Education Campus. I take the opportunity once again to press the Minister to ensure that the project is moved forward at a quick pace. Have there been any delays to the construction of the campus because of COVID? If so, will those delays have an impact on the budget for delivering the project?

**Mr Weir:** There has been some level of impact on the budget, probably caused by the general length of time put in place as a result of this. That has largely come from the issues on the procurement side. COVID itself has not created much direct disruption. On the basis of the

current position, completion is still scheduled for 2025.

The potential issue still to be got across is the successful appointment of a main works contractor. While COVID created a level of disruption for smaller projects, particularly if we go back about a year to when people were completely off-site, the construction industry has worked well and developed things well on a range of school sites and has effectively made up time. The situation that we were in with work meant that the project has not been particularly disrupted by COVID.

**Mrs Barton:** I am delighted that there do not seem to be any more hiccups and that the expected completion date is 2025. Can you give an update on the expenditure so far for the Strule campus and the figure for completion?

**Mr Weir:** About £45 million has been spent so far on the Strule campus. That investment delivered the design, construction and fit-out of Arvalee School and Resource Centre, the Strathroy Link Road to improve traffic flow to and from the campus and the completed sites preparation work. Given the scale of the works, that was a considerable job. It has also delivered the designs for the core schools and the shared facilities.

It is estimated that a further £181 million of costs will be required, including construction costs and a contingency for construction price inflation. That may or may not be necessary, but it is better to overbudget slightly for it. It also includes risk and optimism bias, a staffing programme and other running costs. Her Majesty's Treasury has confirmed the flexibility of Fresh Start Agreement capital funding for the programme, enabling access until the projected programme end date in 2025.

2.15 pm

## SEN Assessment Appeals Process

3. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to review the initial special educational needs (SEN) assessment appeals process in schools. (AQO 2020/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for her question. There are no plans to formally review the initial stages of the SEN assessment processes. If parents are unhappy with a school's internal processes regarding SEN, an option open to them is to contact the dispute avoidance and resolution service (DARS). DARS is an independent confidential service that provides

an opportunity for parents to discuss areas of disagreement with schools and/or the Education Authority regarding SEN provision for their child. That service has been delivered by Global Mediation since September 2019. The aim is for parties to resolve differences about non-appealable matters informally, thus removing the need for a parent to go to the special educational needs and disability tribunal (SENDIST).

**Ms McLaughlin:** I thank the Minister for his answer. We have heard from the Children's Law Centre that 97% of special educational needs appeals have been successful, which has led to claims that there is disability discrimination in the system. That is a serious issue. What action is the Minister taking to resolve that matter? Many children with genuine need are routinely rejected by the assessment process.

**Mr Weir:** In many ways, the success of the appeals process shows that it works. We are doing a couple of things. There is a quinquennial review of the EA going on, particularly in note of the issues raised in the recent audit report, which the Department has agreed to progress. As part of the review, we will look at how the EA deals with special educational needs. With regard to early identification, money has been allocated to implement, from September onwards, the SEN legislation that passed through the House a while ago. The consultation on that has been completed. It will deal with the implementation and the code of practice. Within that framework there should be earlier and, therefore, better identification of children with SEN. That will be an important step in working through the process as we move ahead. More than £20 million has been ring-fenced in the budget this year to make sure that the legislation is implemented and delivered, despite the fact that, overall, it has been relatively close to a flatline budget. We have had to find resources from within the Department to fund it.

**Mr Lyttle:** How seriously is the Education Minister taking the Children's Law Centre assertion that the failings in our special educational needs system in Northern Ireland amount to institutional discrimination against children with disabilities? What responsibility does he take for that? What actions are being taken to address it?

**Mr Weir:** Language can be thrown about that I do not accept, and I do not accept "institutional discrimination" because it attributes a certain level of motivation to those who are directly

involved. There is a review of the EA that focuses particularly on SEN delivery. Action is also being taken on the implementation of the process for dealing with special needs. We believe that that will lead to a step change in what can be provided. Ongoing work is also being done with the EA directly to ensure that there are reductions in the statutory assessment process so that they are delivered in time. The issue is being talked about and worked on very seriously. I am loath to see labels being used, because it is unfair to those who have been involved in trying to deliver for special educational needs.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Minister for the work that he has endeavoured to carry out in relation to the needs of children with special needs. There has been success by way of a reduction in delays. What actions have been taken to ensure that the assessment process has improved so that the ultimate outcome is child-centred and parent-led?

**Mr Weir:** The improvement plan put in place by the EA has delivered a number of key improvements in reducing the number of children waiting longer than 26 weeks for completion of the statutory assessment and, importantly, targeting children who have been waiting longest. As indicated, the new SEN framework will, amongst other things, aim to reduce the timescales associated with the statutory process and improve cooperation between the EA and the health trusts. It is important to note that, while what should be achieved is being achieved, the EA reports that the number of children waiting over the statutory target of 26 weeks, as of 31 March this year, has been reduced to zero. It is important that that is maintained and that no child is waiting longer than the statutory target time.

### **Irish-medium Education: South Down**

4. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to support, including investment in, Irish-medium education in South Down. (AQO 2021/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** In line with my Department's statutory duties, a range of bespoke and sector-specific investment is provided to support the development of Irish-medium education. This includes annual funding to Comhairle Na Gaelscolaíochta, specific support to Irish-medium units, funding to the Education Authority and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, and early years

funding to Altram, which has developed a range of preschool resources aimed at helping immersion learning.

My Department seeks to respond positively to parental demand for Irish-medium provision and works to meet the needs of the sector, for example, in considering home-to-school transport requirements and schools' requests for temporary variations to their approved numbers.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I set up a continuity of learning programme with a focus on supporting pupil learning. Recognising the specific needs of the sector, I included a separate work stream for Irish-medium education. Much valuable work has come out of that work stream. I am also aware of the concerns around the loss of language learning due to the pandemic and the shortage of substitute teachers. My officials continue to work with the relevant partner bodies to seek opportunities to mitigate and resolve such concerns.

With regard to investment in South Down specifically, two additional classrooms were provided at Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche in December 2019, and a minor works scheme is under way to improve access control and reduce standing water in the play area at Gaelscoil na mBeann.

**Ms Ennis:** I thank the Minister for his response. Obviously, there is support and investment in Irish-medium education in South Down, but Bunscoil an Lúir in Newry also caters for children from South Down and is an immediate and direct responsibility of the Department of Education. In that context, Minister, will you give a commitment to visit Gaelscoil na mBeann again, and also Bunscoil an Lúir, to see the excellent work and education that is being provided and to see what investment — capital or otherwise — those schools need to keep that high educational standard going?

**Mr Weir:** I am happy to receive invitations from schools and, where possible, I have accommodated those. I would be more than happy to visit those schools if the Member or the school were to put a formal request to the Department. I have visited a number of Irish-medium schools, particularly with the Member's colleague Karen Mullan in the north-west. I am happy to visit those schools to see, at first hand, what the issues are.

**Mr McNulty:** Minister, I applaud your attempt to pronounce as Gaeilge words. Well done on

that. To follow up on the Bunscoil an Iúir question, at what stage are its new-build plans?

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for his compliments on my linguistic skills. Bunscoil an Iúir — at this point, I have probably blown whatever credibility I had — applied to the school enhancement programme, and, at that stage, it was not ranked high enough. There are no direct plans, at present, for a redevelopment of the school. However, the Department has undertaken to do a further site search on behalf of the school to look at its long-term planning and potential future. It is not just about where we will be in two or three years, it is about the longer position. Until it is approved for a scheme, no capital will be allocated to the redevelopment of the school but, where required, minor works will continue to be undertaken at the existing site.

### **Seaview Primary School and Nursery Unit**

5. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made on new school premises for Seaview Primary School and Nursery Unit, Belfast. (AQO 2022/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** The business case for the major works project at Seaview Primary School is still in preparation. It will examine a number of options for the location of the school, including the option of a rebuild on the existing site. It is expected that the business case will be completed in late summer of this year. Until the business case has been finalised, we cannot determine the preferred option for the major capital project, but that decision should follow the completion of the business case in the summer.

**Mr Humphrey:** I am disappointed to hear from the Minister that the business case has not yet been finalised. I fully understand the need for a special needs school in north Belfast, and I very much support that. I am disappointed that the former Castle High School site has been chosen as a temporary site for the new school. Given that the Minister visited the school last year, he is aware of the interest that the governors, the principal and I have in the school potentially relocating there.

Will the Minister commit to ensuring that the business case is completed by the end of the summer? That school has waited for some eight years. Will he also commit to meeting the principal and the governors again, with me, to

give that reassurance? There is considerable annoyance among —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Will the Member finish his question?

**Mr Humphrey:** — the professional teachers and the governors.

**Mr Weir:** I understand that. I will do all that I can to ensure that the business case is completed within that timescale. I am also happy to meet the governors and the principal of the school.

Although the Fortwilliam site will be used as a temporary site for the special needs school from September, I do not believe that that is a viable long-term solution. That site, which may be one of the most likely site options for Seaview Primary, should not be knocked out of the picture because of the temporary arrangements for the special needs situation. We also need longer-term plans for the broader provision of special needs education within Belfast. The situation with Fortwilliam is very much a temporary fix and should not in any way prejudice the options for Seaview.

**Dr Aiken:** I have a declaration of interest: I am a member of the board of governors of the excellent Kilbride Central Primary School up in my constituency. One issue that we, as a board of governors, have had — we have probably alluded to this — is that much of the work that we do seems to be repeated, even though we already have plans and future plans for what we plan to do. Can the Minister commit to getting the Education Authority and the various other organisations to rationalise what they are trying to do, rather than wasting government money by requiring second and third sets of plans?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** That is beyond the scope of the original question. The Minister may choose whether to answer.

**Mr Weir:** I would certainly encourage them not to waste government money. That would cause a demarcation dispute, because that is generally my role. In all seriousness, we will work on that particular case, and I will get any further information directly to the Member.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Philip McGuigan is not in his place. John Blair is not in his place.

### **Schools: COVID-19 Counselling Services**

9. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Education, given the impact COVID-19 has had on young people, to outline what additional support he will provide to schools to resource counselling services. (AQO 2026/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** Question 9? We are working our way very heavily through the folder today.

The Education Authority has advised, through the Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS), that post-primary-aged young people from mainstream schools, special schools and education other than at school provision can access school counselling if that is required. Although school staff anticipated an overwhelming increase in demand for the counselling service, that has not been evidenced by the number of referrals that have been received so far. Since young people have returned to on-site learning, the demand for counselling has increased but has not overwhelmed the service. The ICSS providers are managing the pressures by putting additional resources into schools where demand has increased, using some of the allocation for counselling sessions for July and August 2021 to do so.

**Mr Harvey:** Will the Minister advise whether his Department plans to enhance teacher training relating to mental health issues among students?

**Mr Weir:** We give a level of flexibility for teacher training, and we have indicated that we encourage development around special needs and trauma. From that point of view, we are working alongside the Department of Health to ensure that additional support is put in place this year for an emotional health and well-being framework, and that that support continues to be put in place. That should mean that there are greater opportunities for schools to access counselling resources. Also, given the circumstances, while a lot of focus has been on the post-primary sector, there may be a feeling that there have not been enough resources for the primary sector. As part of addressing that, we will have a pilot scheme for primary-school counselling.

**2.30 pm**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I am afraid that the time allocated for listed questions is up. We will now move on to topical questions.

Pat Sheehan is not in his place.

## **Mental Health Support: School Staff and Students**

T3. **Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Education what conversations he has had and what steps he has taken to ensure that staff and students have good, easily accessible support for their mental health, given that she knows that he and Minister Swann have a key interest in mental health. (AQT 1293/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for at least not playing truant today and for her question. There are two strands to the matter. We are working together on it. Sometimes, staff can maybe be a little bit overlooked. We are applying, at two levels, the emotional health and well-being framework, which is directly baselined and has Education and Health components. To some extent, as we move ahead, that work will be, in many ways, about trialling a range of supports. I do not think that anybody would pretend that everything will be got right from day one, and, to some extent, the trials will show what level of adjustment there needs to be. The importance of the work is that, at present, £6.5 million will be directly mainstreamed into the budget.

Additionally, the aim is to have a COVID recovery fund of about £5 million to directly target emotional health and well-being. There will be a level of a mixed economy in that, because what is provided through the framework will, to a certain extent, be top-down. The money that will be allocated as part of the COVID recovery will be an allocation per head to schools, and a high level of flexibility will be given to schools in how they spend that. We have indicated that, for example, while the focus will quite often be on the pupils, if there are individual actions that a school feels will be beneficial to its staff or, indeed, in helping create a certain environment, flexibility will be given to those on the ground to decide where they believe the most need is.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the Minister for his positive answer. I think that schools will welcome that flexibility. I know that you have already taken some steps to tackle cyberbullying, which is a massive issue that we know can have a detrimental impact on young people and their overall well-being. What further steps are you taking to either stop it or to support students and families who are experiencing it?

**Mr Weir:** As the Member will be aware, the anti-bullying legislation will be implemented from 1 September. That was passed some time ago, and we all worked with the trade unions on it. That will have a particular focus on what is

directly happening in schools. Part of the problem that we face and that we have faced for a number of years with bullying, trolling and a range of issues goes beyond simply what happens in the purview of the school and in the classroom.

We have been working, and we will continue to work, on a cross-departmental basis on e-safety in particular. It was noticeable that during COVID we were able to roll out and get support for one of the apps that is available. We will work with others to try to make what impact we can. All of us realise the enormity of e-safety and e-bullying, and that means that, at times, finding solutions will be a lot more difficult than finding a silver bullet to end it. We would all like to see it end, but it is about trying to at least restrain it and take steps and make interventions where we can. We will continue to work with Health, Justice and others, because the issue stretches across a range of Departments. There is no doubt that, today, our young people are under greater pressure, particularly because cyberbullying is more common than it has ever been.

## Summer Youth Activity Scheme

T4. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Education, following his announcement yesterday of an additional £5 million for summer interventions and youth activity for children in Northern Ireland, to detail what the funding will be used for and how organisations can apply for it. (AQT 1294/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** It is available now. From 5.00 pm yesterday, organisations were able to apply for it. I think that it closes on 21 May. I should make sure that I get the date right. There are a number of strands to it. Part of the programme is Access for All, which will enable, I think, 65 activity camps in Northern Ireland. There is a Summer Jam programme.

The first is open to a range of youth organisations and community groups to apply for. A second strand will provide support for Church and uniformed organisations in particular. A Summer Boost scheme will enable those working on the ground in youth settings to provide greater outreach support over the summer. It will also facilitate longer opening hours for youth centres. A fourth strand will provide materials.

The impacts of the schemes will cover a wide range of activities from sports to the creative arts. We hope that, as restrictions ease, some of the activities will involve whole families and

include interaction with adults. There will be something for everyone, irrespective of where their interests lie. Given the pressures that some of our young people in particular have been under because of the COVID situation, it is critical, as we move ahead, to provide this support over the summer. A lot of our young people have perhaps suffered more than almost any other group in society.

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I can hear Mr Humphrey's enthusiasm from the Back Benches. As we all know, he has long since left the Scouts but is still very involved.

The funding is very welcome. Will the Minister indicate how much each of these groups will be able to apply for, or what size the fund is for each group?

**Mr Weir:** In Access to All, which is for non-EA-registered voluntary groups, it can be up to £10,000 or, depending on the number of participants, possibly up to £25,000. For local area-based projects, Summer Jam funding can be anywhere from £6,000 to £60,000, depending on the number of participants. For Summer Boost, it can be up to £15,000 per programme. For the fourth strand, which is the camp equipment grant, individual applications can be for up to £2,500. A wide range of funding is available through the schemes.

## School Enhancement Programme: Funding

T5. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Education when the next round of school enhancement programme (SEP) funding will be available. (AQT 1295/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I intend to review progress. At the moment, 72 projects are advanced in design under the second call to the school enhancement programme. I will consider whether to make a third call for applications as part of the overall capital investment strategy. The SEP has been very successful, so I suspect that, ultimately, another call for SEP funding is a question of when rather than if.

**Mr Robinson:** I thank the Minister for his answer. When the funding becomes available, will the Minister consider prioritising schools such as Limavady High School, in my constituency, which requires facilities to ensure pupil health and fitness?

**Mr Weir:** All politics is local. I know that the Member has taken a strong interest in

Limavady High School, and I, along with others, was able to visit it and discuss the matter with the school principal.

There are competing demands for capital investment. When an SEP call is made, it will be on the basis of competition between all schools that apply. The fact that a range of schools currently benefits from the programme should mean that their facilities are advanced enough that, while there will not be a bar on their applying to the SEP again, schools that have not benefited to date will have a better chance because they will have moved up the ladder. For any school, it is important to engage continuously with the Education Authority so that action can be taken on minor works in the meantime. Having been in Carrickfergus yesterday, I know that the EA is to replace school windows on that campus over the next few months. It is not a case of either/or; all applications will be treated on merit and scored according to the condition of the school and what each school needs.

### **Boards of Governors: EA Accountability**

**T6. Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Education what accountability mechanisms the Education Authority (EA) has to ensure that boards of governors, collectively and as individual members, fulfil their stated responsibilities as trustees of public funding. (AQT 1296/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I pay tribute to a lot of the work that has been done by boards of governors. Obviously, yes, they are responsible for training and ultimately accountable to the EA. Indeed, they have to operate within an allocated budget. If there are mechanisms by which we can provide greater support and accountability for boards of governors, we will need to do that. We want to create a situation in which responsibilities are taken seriously, but we do not want to create a scenario in which being a member of a board of governors becomes such an onerous position that nobody wants to take it on.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Will the Minister outline what powers, if any, the Education Authority has to sanction or remove boards of governors or individual governors who fail to govern in line with the Education Authority's scheme of management?

**Mr Weir:** I do not have the details to hand, but I will write to the Member with those.

### **School Assessments: DE/CCEA Monitoring**

**T7. Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Education, in this mental health week, to confirm the extent of the monitoring that is being undertaken by the Department of Education and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) on the controlled assessments that are taking place in schools, given the significant negative impact that those are having on students. (AQT 1297/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** With respect to the Member, we have given advice to schools on what assessments should be put in place. Indeed, there is no direct requirement to do that. There is no easy way to gain qualifications that will be recognised not only throughout the UK but worldwide. That has to be done on the basis of robust evidence. There is an absence of direct examinations for 2021. There needs to be an evidence base for the awarding of qualifications. However, we have made it very clear, for instance, that there is no compulsory nature to any controlled assessment. Indeed, the advice that CCEA and I have been given is to limit the level of controlled assessment in schools. However, schools have the power to do that. It is wrong to pretend that there is a very easy solution that simply enables qualifications to be awarded without a clear pathway of evidence to support them.

**Ms Armstrong:** I am disappointed by the Minister's response, because I believe that it is the Department of Education and CCEA's responsibility to monitor the impacts that this has on children. To speak again about mental health and to pick up on a point made by Miss Woods, it has come to my attention that there is a primary school in my constituency where the board of governors has not met, leading to stress for staff and parents. What action will you take to ensure the effective governance of primary schools and, in particular, to protect staff who are employed by the Education Authority?

**Mr Weir:** I am not aware of that case. If the Member wants to write to me with the details, we will follow that up. It is probably not appropriate to discuss an individual case across the Floor, but we will pursue that.

### **Holy Trinity College, Cookstown**

**T8. Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education for an update on progress with the

construction at Holy Trinity secondary school, Cookstown. (AQT 1298/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** I do not have the detail of Holy Trinity primary —.

**Mr McGlone:** Secondary.

**Mr Weir:** Secondary, sorry. I do not have the details directly to hand. I will get some details to the Member and put those on the record. You will appreciate that, as this is a topical question, I do not have details on the school directly to hand.

**Mr McGlone:** That is grand. I thank the Minister for that. I do not expect him to have all the details in front of him for every potential question.

### School Starting-age Flexibility

T9. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Education to state how likely it is that families will have clarity on the issue of a flexible school-starting age before the end of this mandate, given that, last week, the Education Committee was briefed on the Department's plans to introduce such flexibility, with some concern raised that it might not be possible to introduce legislation within this mandate. (AQT 1299/17-22)

**Mr Weir:** We all hope that the mandate runs to its full extent. Given that we must have a consultation on the proposals, it will be challenging. I think that it is achievable, but there is a risk that it will not happen. I am sure that the Committee and everyone in the House will want to make sure that this is put to bed this term. I believe that it is achievable within this mandate. We just have to make sure that we do not take any steps that elongate the process.

2.45 pm

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** That is the end of the time allocated to questions to the Minister of Education. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before we return to the debate on the protection of peatlands and woodlands.

## Private Members' Business

### Strategies to Protect Peatlands and Woodlands

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly pays tribute to the heroic efforts by those emergency service personnel from across these islands and the local community who responded to the recent wildfires in the Mourne; notes the importance of preserving the natural environment for improving air quality, biodiversity, carbon capture and combating the climate emergency; further notes the importance of both rewilding and protecting peatlands in tackling the climate emergency; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to produce fully resourced strategies and implementation plans to protect, preserve and enhance our peatlands and woodlands without further delay. — [Mr McGrath.]*

**Mr Blair:** Before I begin, I apologise to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for not being in my place to ask my question of the Minister of Education. I hope that you and other Members understand that that related to the choreography of getting here and the limited numbers allowed in the Chamber. My sincere apologies.

With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will briefly mention the inquest outcome that found the Ballymurphy victims innocent. I pay tribute to their families on the vindication of their campaign, and my thoughts are with them.

The point has been made many times, but I will further emphasise it: we are facing a climate and ecological crisis. Northern Ireland's unique natural environment is under significant threat. I have asked a number of questions on the issue, both questions for written answer and in the Chamber. Last week, I met the Mourne Heritage Trust to discuss the matters that are the subject of the motion. Although we commonly refer to "wildfires", as was said to me during that meeting and has been on other occasions, those fires are not wild. As the Minister said in response to questions on his statement a couple of weeks ago, for the most part such fires are caused by human bad practice, and we should reflect that when we speak on the issues.

Ammonia levels have risen by 22% in Northern Ireland since 2010, compared with an increase of 5% in the rest of the UK. Some 98% of designated special areas of conservation

(SACs) are exceeding critical key levels of pollutants. That can seriously impact on protected sites such as peatlands and woodlands. Northern Ireland has about 8% of tree cover, which is thought to be the lowest in Europe, and our forest cover is around 40% lower than the UK average. It is therefore hardly surprising to learn that our land use, land-use change and forestry (LULUCF) sector, unlike that of Great Britain, is a net carbon source rather than a net sink.

Investing in peatland restoration and ambitious afforestation is critical if we are serious about a green recovery. The time to act is now.

We need to seize the many cross-cutting environmental and economic opportunities, such as rewilding and habitat restoration, in order to enable landowners in rural communities to diversify their income in areas where farming alone is no longer the only viable option. We need ambitious, long-term plans and concrete actions to restore our damaged ecosystems. We need to catch up with the rest of the UK and deliver a comprehensive recovery strategy in tandem with legislative change.

Last year, the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, announced a fund of £640 million to plant more than 40 million trees and restore 35,000 hectares of peatland in England, with the Scottish and Welsh Governments also investing in similar schemes. The Irish Government have approved an allocation of €108 million for a bog rehabilitation plan. In Northern Ireland, we have made a significant start with the green growth strategy and the Forests for our Future, but more is required.

In Northern Ireland, our peatlands are under threat, with pressures such as overgrazing, drainage and burning causing damage to 86% of them. As a result, many of our peatlands are now net emitters of greenhouse gases. It is critical that we develop similar schemes here if we are to restore our natural carbon store.

The Alliance Party's green new deal, launched last month, outlines my party's plans to deliver large-scale biodiversity restoration and a continued urgent need for an independent Northern Ireland environmental protection agency. On behalf of Alliance, I support the motion and thank the Members for bringing it forward. The motion's purpose is to introduce strategies to protect our treasured natural environments, to encourage others to do the same, and to progress these urgent matters for the good of our people and our future. With my Alliance colleagues, I support the motion.

**Mr M Bradley:** I support the motion. It is both a timely and necessary realisation that our peatbogs, wetlands and forests should be a priority for the Executive. The Executive need to pay more attention to the protection and enhancement of our unique environment.

I join other Members in highlighting the bravery and dedication of our emergency services and members of the community who battled the Mourne wildfire. Those involved put their lives at risk to bring that fire under control, and it is right that they are praised and recognised for their efforts.

While we are about to launch a peatlands strategy document, the primary challenge to peatland restoration is economic. We have spent decades draining peatlands, grasslands and wetlands, all at a cost. However, reversing that drainage also comes at a cost. Altering drainage patterns and local hydro-geography can be costly, but that cost must be met, and it is well worth the expense to the Executive.

The loss of species by wildfires like that on the Mourne can take decades to repair. We need a strategy to reintroduce species where necessary and to enhance the recovery of other species that have been displaced. Peatlands provide an important habitat for many species, and restoration efforts will also have important benefits for biodiversity. Despite the economic hurdles, the technical capacity for restoring peatlands already exists and could be brought in very quickly.

Yesterday, someone said — I think that it was Mr McGlone — that we should leave the environment in a better place than we inherited it. I agree. We owe it to our children and to our children's children to protect our environment. On that note, I conclude by saying that I support the motion.

**Mr McGuigan:** Like others, I pay tribute to the women and men of our fire service who recently battled the wildfire in the Mourne and, indeed, those in Kerry too. My sister-in-law is a firefighter who has been involved in tackling wildfires, both in the glens of Antrim and the Sperrins, so I know from her the dedication and bravery required for that task.

Nobody could have watched the scenes from the recent fire in the Mourne on our TVs, listened to tales of the local community, or heard from environmentalists detailing the devastating impact of the fire and not have been moved. The environmental impact of such a fire is massive. Last year, in my own constituency of North Antrim, there was a similar wildfire — I take on board the

terminology of John Blair, but I am not going to change my speech now, and it is in the motion — in Slieveanorra, between Loughill and the glens. Two years before that, there was another fire on the Craigs Road in my constituency, just outside Rasharkin, and in years gone by, the same on the grass side of Knocklayde Mountain in Ballycastle. Those fires are happening much too frequently. The damage and environmental impact that they cause are much too great.

Like others, I support the motion. Who could argue against the importance of preserving and protecting the natural environment? As the motion states, we need to do so in order to positively impact on air quality, biodiversity and carbon capture and, ultimately, help to combat climate change. We need to rewild and protect peatlands. Uplands are an important part of the ecosystem. As it has been pointed out, peatlands are an excellent carbon sink. The South and other regions on these islands have peatland strategies. It is imperative that the Minister publishes a strategy as soon as possible that deals with peatlands and woodlands and is resourced properly to do so.

I have said many times in the Chamber how privileged I am to live in and represent the constituency of North Antrim, easily the most beautiful part of Ireland.

**Mr Storey:** Northern Ireland.

**Mr McGuigan:** I nearly got agreement from my constituency colleague there.

Leaving aside the internationally renowned heritage sites and beauty spots, it is a part of the world that is blessed with some of the most beautiful environmentally rich places, including peatlands and woodlands. Forests and woodlands play a key environmental role, but they also act as key locations for tourism and recreation. In 2019, it was estimated that almost 9 million visits were made to forest estates during an eight-month period.

During last year, under the circumstances of the pandemic, many more people, including me, will have reacquainted themselves with the natural environment. I feel lucky to have been able to exercise by running through the Slieveanorra and Garvagh forests or to go for walks and introduce my newborn granddaughter to the beauty of the Glenariff and Portglenone forests on many occasions during the past year. I suspect that, even when normality returns, those are habits that I and many others will keep up. It was compelling to witness individuals using forests and woodlands

to exercise, walk the dog and meet up safely with family and friends in outdoor settings as the restrictions allowed.

I have no doubt that, when he gets up to speak, the Minister will find some way to negatively connect the motion to the positive advancement, yesterday, of the Climate Change Bill's moving to Committee Stage. He will have to get over that and accept that the majority of MLAs in the Chamber want to see more ambition on the climate and environment than that to which he has, thus far, been prepared to accede. Yesterday's vote proved that. I hope that he takes note of that.

**Mr Storey:** I thank my colleague from North Antrim for giving way. Will he and those who were vociferous in the House yesterday accept that the greatest custodians of the environment, peatlands and forests are the very farmers whom they, with their Climate Change Bill, want to actually put out of business?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr McGuigan:** I will accept the first part of the Member's assertion. Yesterday, everybody stated that we cannot achieve climate progress without the custodians of the environment, who are the farmers. However, the Bill is not about the decimation of rural communities; it is about protecting those rural communities and the role that farmers in those communities have for future generations beyond the current one.

I was just talking about the vote yesterday. I suppose that the Minister's mind is on another, upcoming vote. Maybe, after Friday, he will find himself in a different position. Time will tell. Either way, there is plenty of time left within the mandate for him, if he remains the Agriculture Minister, to proactively and progressively bring forward a strategy on the issue in the motion and many other strategies that would set the course to protect and advance environmental policies in the North for the benefit of all citizens.

**Mr Harvey:** At the outset of my remarks, I want to take the opportunity to join other Members in paying tribute to the many agencies and individuals who fought the recent fire in the Mourne. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and Forest Service, alongside the UK and Irish coastguards and the council all played a role. I wish to echo the words and thanks that have already been given.

It is sad to say that the recent fire in the Mourne Mountains has caused untold damage to the biodiversity, wildlife and natural habitats of the area. Without the dedicated and professional efforts of everyone who was involved, the devastation could have been even worse. It will take time to assess the scale of the damage that has been inflicted on the environment.

I know that the Minister has already outlined his commitment to work with the relevant stakeholders to rebuild, restore and, most importantly, learn from this tragic event.

### 3.00 pm

We must all engage in seeking to prevent any recurrence of the scenes that we witnessed, with the silhouette of the blazing Mournes countryside against the night sky. Prevention must be our key focus as the work commences to repair the environmental damage. Greater enforcement and targeted legislation are required to deal with the problem. We cannot afford to take our environment for granted, particularly given its importance to tourism and local communities.

Mention has been made of the need for the greater use of firebreaks to limit future damage in light of the sheer size of the area affected by the recent fire. That must be seriously considered for the future. The addition of 2-metre firebreaks could significantly protect heathland and limit future risk. I am aware that the Minister is committed to working closely with the National Trust, which has responsibility for a considerable part of the upper Mournes, to identify the scale of the damage, establish a recovery plan and ensure that funding is provided to allow the roots of recovery to take hold as soon as possible. I welcome those commitments.

The Department has also recognised that Northern Ireland's density of woodland lags behind the rest of the UK and other jurisdictions. That recognition has been evident in the initiatives that the Minister has recently commenced to tackle the problem. The Forests for our Future scheme is one of those initiatives, and I was delighted to hear this week that 670,000 trees have so far been planted as a result of that programme. Of course, that is a component of the green growth strategy being spearheaded by DAERA, of which the development of a peatland strategy will be an important strand. Woodland creation is a simple, low-cost option to improve our landscape and remove carbon from the atmosphere to help meet the UK's net zero

carbon target by 2050. It does not just provide economic benefits and incentives to farms: it enhances biodiversity in local areas and increases carbon capture.

The recent wildfires have highlighted the need for greater protection of our heathlands, peatlands and key environmental assets as a whole. The strategies that the Minister has committed to will no doubt result in further legislative underpinning and protections, which will be needed to ensure that we not only rewind those areas but protect them for the future, as, the motion rightly states, will be needed.

**Ms Ennis:** This morning, a Sinn Féin delegation led by Chris Hazzard, the MP for South Down, and including the Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, joined the National Trust to survey the damage caused by last month's devastating fire in the Mournes. I spoke to my colleagues prior to coming into the Chamber for the debate to get their feedback, and they spoke of the impact and the effect on our wildlife and sensitive habitats as apocalyptic. The motion acknowledges the heroic efforts by the fire and rescue services in tackling the fire in the way that they did. I reiterate my thanks and those of the people across South Down and beyond to the men and women who battled acres of blazing peatland with shovels in the most oppressive heat and in a gruelling location.

The Mournes are an area of outstanding natural beauty. They are an iconic natural asset not just for this region but for the island as a whole. During the last year, they have taken on a greater significance for people, with many trekking and hiking in them and some people discovering their majesty for the first time. That is one of the only positives to come out of COVID over the last year. However, the Mournes are more than just a nice place to spend a day. Their peatlands and heathlands are special areas of conservation, and they are designated for their wildlife and habitats. Recently, I heard the Economy Minister encouraging people to holiday at home and take advantage of the natural assets that we have on our doorsteps. That is great — of course we want people to come to south Down — but the Economy Minister and her Department need to get real about the impact of increased tourism on places like south Down, Kilbroney, the areas around Carlingford lough and, of course, the Mournes. I call on her to make funding available from her Department to mitigate the impact that increased tourism will have.

Some 3 square kilometres of the Mourne were burned, including vital peatland. A large number of nesting birds were waiting on their young to hatch, and we have many other forms of wildlife that contribute to the delicate ecosystem that exists in the Mourne. As my colleague alluded to, peatlands lock away carbon, which is an essential function in helping Ireland and Britain to meet their targets in reducing greenhouse gases. Put simply, we just cannot afford to lose that amount of peatland. It was not a one-off event. The area has been burnt before, and we know that certain species simply have not recovered from the last event. Every time we have a wildfire, particularly if it is on the scale that we have experienced in the Mourne in recent years, we lose more and more vital plant life, animals, insects and, of course, peatland.

I cannot let the debate go by without talking about gorse fires and land clearing. We know that the latest fire in the Mourne was started deliberately. The Minister suggested at the time that it could have been a result of day trippers hiking up the Mourne in their flip-flops and lighting barbecues. Maybe it was, or maybe the more plausible explanation is that it was a result of land clearing. Certainly, the intent was to cause damage, but what we can all hopefully agree on is that gorse burning as a means of clearing land is not the way to do it and should not be incentivised.

I know that the relevant agencies are continuing their investigations. Hopefully, they will be successful in their efforts, but what will the punishment be? The judicial process for such matters is wholly inadequate. A small fine will probably be the result. The punishment for this type of arson should match the crime of destroying a natural asset.

The majority of farmers care greatly for the environment, but Governments North and South must work with farmers to enable them to transition to practices that do not necessitate such destruction. Governments must also manage and protect our areas of natural beauty instead of prostituting them for economic gain. There is a draft peatlands strategy gathering dust in the Department: let us get it off the shelf and get it published.

As I said in the Chamber a couple of weeks ago, £4.5 million has been spent by the Fire and Rescue Service on tackling wildfires, yet local management groups like the Mourne Heritage Trust receive only a fraction of that to manage and protect the Mourne. We have got our priorities all wrong with that, and something needs to change. I am delighted that, following his visit to the Mourne this morning, the

Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, has pledged to make the necessary funding available to help repair the damage. We know that we will need expert ecologists and biologists to be brought in to assess the damage, and Minister Murphy has pledged that there will be no more looking down the back of the sofa for pennies to help repair the damage that has been caused. However, throwing money at it is not the answer. It will not be enough if we do not have a plan. We need a plan, and I call on the Minister to establish a task force and a round-table discussion immediately that will involve central government, councils and various agencies and landowners putting the necessary action plans in place to protect and repair our most precious environments.

**Ms S Bradley:** As a representative from the SDLP and particularly as a South Down representative, I am honoured to put my name to the motion. At the outset, I, like other Members, put on record my thanks to the brave firefighters who stepped up in the recent wildfires in the Mourne and played their part in bringing that fire under control. The report stated that there were in excess of 100 firefighters and partner agencies from across the island involved in tackling the fires and bringing them under control. We owe all those individuals a huge debt of gratitude for the tremendous work that they did. It has to be said that that work was quite perilous at times. There was without doubt a sense that it was a major incident, and, as information rolled out across the community, it became abundantly clear that it was a major incident; in fact, I will quote the assistant chief fire and rescue officer, Aidan Jennings, who said about the fire that it was:

*"undoubtedly one of the most challenging gorse fires Firefighters have ever had to deal with."*

The firefighters, alongside their public service partners, have to be thanked.

We must also take a moment to thank the local community, which played its part in supporting those teams. I am sure that many Members will be aware of him, but I can think of one person who epitomises that public spirit, and that is young Charlie Thomson, aged 12. I understand that his dad is a lifeboat volunteer, so he comes from good stock and understands the roles played by volunteers and all those who work for our emergency services.

Young Charlie expressed to his mum his desire to do something to try to help the firefighters who were up there representing and helping all

of us. In a very short time, he managed to raise, I believe, £1,900, which was used to bring snacks and water to the firefighters. As the flames rose to mighty heights on Slieve Donard and elsewhere in the Mourne, so, too, did that community spirit, and, to my mind, Charlie Thomson epitomised that. I thank Charlie and all the community representatives who played similar roles in assisting those who were helping us.

Peatlands, and fens and bogs in particular, create ecosystems with a unique quality. We need to understand their history. That landscape has evolved since the last ice age, so it is in our interests to ensure that we do everything in our power not only to sustain and protect it but to make sure that our life habits work in unison with it. It is unique, but it is a fragile type of landscape that requires our support. I, like many others, genuinely welcome the fact that many people have reconnected with outdoor spaces as a result of COVID. However, there is no denying that, as going to those spaces becomes more routine, we must all educate ourselves better on how we support and protect the very environments that we are enjoying.

South Down is, in my view, the jewel in the crown of Northern Ireland's outdoor offering. It is no surprise to me that not only people from south Down want to enjoy our beautiful natural environment. We want to build a tourism strategy that will attract people to the area. We must do that in a really sensitive way, appreciating that we have to make sure —

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

**Ms S Bradley:** I will indeed. We have to make sure that all policies, including the ones that the motion asks for, are developed in a way that protects those lands. Any policy must be fully resourced. We should go forward on the basis of that resourcing, which will have a direct effect on protecting the biodiversity that we inherited.

**Mr Wells:** We are privileged to have the Minister with us. Before he inevitably moves on to higher things, I will use this short period of five minutes — hopefully six, if someone intervenes quickly — to ask him three pertinent questions about the motion.

Minister, do you accept that peatlands have the most enormous potential to mitigate climate change in Northern Ireland? Their proper use could overcome some of the issues related to reducing stock levels that were raised

yesterday. Eighteen per cent of our land in Northern Ireland is peatlands. At the minute, peatlands are a net contributor to carbon emissions, but, if properly utilised, they could be a vast store for carbon. The Department is funding projects on the Garron in Antrim and Cuilcagh in Fermanagh. Can the Minister guarantee that those will continue? Can he explain why his Department still allows the destruction of peatlands when we know that they have such potential for carbon storage? Why are we giving planning permission for peat extraction and the development of peatlands when they have so much potential to store carbon? Why has the Department not completed the area of special scientific interest, special protection area and special area of conservation designations? The Act came in in 1985, and I am able to tell him how long ago that was because I was in the Chamber when it passed. Here we are, 36 years later, and we still have not completed our ASSI designation.

We still have not given protection to the habitats mentioned in the motion. That is question 1, Minister.

### 3.15 pm

Question 2 is about afforestation, which is absolutely essential to the storage of carbon in Northern Ireland. Why, oh why is his Department giving grant aid and consent to using exotic coniferous species such as Sitka spruce, lodgepole pine and Norway spruce? We all read 'Farming Life', which is the official journal of the honourable Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Irwin. He is in it every week, and I think that he has shares in 'Farming Life'. He is certainly one of its major contributors. I read it every week just to find out what Mr Irwin is saying to me, and it is all good stuff. I read this week's article, which talks about a wonderful new scheme to plant 50 hectares of woodland in north Antrim. "Great," I said, until I read the text, which said that half of the first tranche would be foreign alien species, which do nothing for biological conservation and do very little for the sequestration of carbon. That is question 2, Minister.

Question 3 is this: when will his Department take fires in the Mourne seriously? I will use parliamentary privilege here, Mr Deputy Speaker. In May 2019, there was a serious fire on the Leitrim Road adjacent to Castlewellan forest park. The landowner, a Mr King, deliberately lit that fire. I believe that I have privilege: he deliberately lit that fire. Forest Service staff approached Mr King and said that, if he did not put the fire out, it would spread to

Castlewellan forest park and cause a lot of damage to public land. He ignored them, and what happened? The fire then spread to Castlewellan forest park, causing enormous damage. I provided the name of the culprit to the police, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and the Department's Forest Service, but absolutely nothing was done. There was no interview, and nor was there any potential prosecution. Had an example been made of that individual, it would have sent out a massive signal to the community that we will not tolerate such actions.

As Ms Ennis said, those fires are not accidental. They are caused by landowners burning off vegetation in the spring to increase yields. Why do they occur in April and May and not in August? It is because there is no benefit in setting light to the mountainside in August; it is done in April and May. Before the Minister moves on to much higher things, his Department needs to deal with the situation immediately.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I remind Members that it is up to them to ensure that anything that they say is within the law and any protections that may exist.

**Ms Armstrong:** I thank the proposers of the motion; it is an important debate. I will have to recommend myself for disciplinary action because I find myself agreeing with Mr Wells far too much.

**Mr Wells:** Oh, no. [*Laughter.*]

**Ms Armstrong:** Of course I support the motion. I am one of those people who are affectionately known as "tree huggers". Like the Minister's colleague, my colleague in Strangford Jim Shannon MP, I have planted many trees, and I maintain a wildlife sanctuary on the Ards peninsula. If only we had more trees. However, as Mr Wells said, my commitment is to natural trees that are native to Northern Ireland, which should be protected. I agree with him that invasive external species should not be used here.

We have a vibrant biodiversity in Northern Ireland, but it is being harmed by red tape. While I absolutely agree with the Minister's planned Forests for Our Future project, I have a concern that, when planning permission goes forward through different councils across Northern Ireland, the red tape ties them up and they cannot proactively protect woodlands; in fact, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), which is supposed to look after our

environment, is at times tied up with red tape. That is why I support the idea of an independent environment agency.

I agree with the RSPB, which has called for the need to resource fully a strategy to protect, preserve and enhance our peatlands and woodlands. As part of that resourcing and as part of the Minister of Finance's review of building regulations, I would like Minister Poots to take forward some further support with planners to ensure that woods can be protected. There is a quarry in my area that has been defunct for over 50 years. There is a woodland that a developer is trying to develop, and the planning officers say that their hands are tied.

I have to say that the destruction of wildlife that is happening is not on.

There is not as much peatland in my constituency as there is in others. I watched my neighbouring mountains in South Down burn. What a sight it was to see, just beyond the Ards peninsula, the sky lit up bright red that night. All that I could think of was the Fire and Rescue Service personnel, who, at that time, were battling down the fires with shovels and coping with all that smoke. It is really hard to imagine the nightmare in which they were working. It is amazing that they managed to get the fires out. We did not have rain over that time, unfortunately. It came a bit later the next week. How many people have to put their life in danger, however, before the issue is dealt with? I agree with Mr Wells that there needs to be stronger legislation in place so that, when people are found to be breaking environmental laws, more can be done. I absolutely support the Minister in taking something forward.

Minister, you said in your statement on 26 April 2021:

*"We cannot afford to take our environment for granted." — [Official Report (Hansard), 26 April 2021, p10, col 2].*

I do not think that you do. I know that you said that the £340 million associated with the European Union should be provided directly through Westminster and not via the Barnett consequentials, and I would love to see a strategy developed for how we can get that amount of money invested in our environment in Northern Ireland.

I know that a lot of farmers are concerned about the Climate Change Bill that is going through the House. They are the custodians of our environment. I live in a rural area, surrounded

by farmers, and I know many farmers who are saying, "If we are part of the discussions on that, we can help and improve things". In fact, Jim Shannon MP said in the House of Commons:

*"All types of moorland need some land management to maintain the protected and rare habitats and the species that thrive in them."*

We will depend on our farmers to do that.

Today's motion is calling for resources to ensure that our peatlands and woodlands can be protected, but that cannot be done just by the House. Rather, it has to be done in partnership with others, such as our councils and the NIEA. The Environment and Climate Change Committee in Westminster wanted to ban the burning of peatlands by 2020. Why can we not be that strident? Why do we not try to achieve something that forward-thinking? Our schools, our planning departments and our councils all have a role to play. Minister, I will support you to the hilt if you take that measure forward. We cannot stop looking after our environment because some people want to have planned burning, which risks so much of our habitat.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Members, at last week's Business Committee, it was agreed that, in some circumstances, the Speaker may add a little time to time-limited debates. I have decided to exercise that discretion today, so the remaining two Members who wish to speak will have five minutes each in which to do so.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate. The Minister will know the area that I speak of fairly well, as it is in a neighbouring constituency. I am from the townland of the Montiaghs, and some people may know that it takes seven Derries to make a Montiagh. The area in which I was born is called Derrymore, and "Doire Mór" means "big oak tree", but no one would know from where we get our place names, because of a lot of the woodland and native species have all but disappeared. Indeed, Mr Wells will know it exceptionally well, particularly Portmore Lough, where we have the excellent RSPB sanctuary. The preservation of the lowland around Portmore Lough is managed by the RSPB, which I commend for its efforts.

I join others in commenting on the courage and tenacity of the firefighters and, indeed, the local community on the evening of the fire in the Mournes. I also join Mr Blair in marking the fact

that the 10 people who were murdered by British Army forces in Ballymurphy have been found innocent today. I pay tribute to them and to their families, who have not only restored their relatives' reputations but highlighted some of the truth of the past, which the Secretary of State seems determined to bury.

I will return to the debate in hand, I know that a number of Members have spoken about peatlands and woodlands and the importance of those environments for rewilding. In the short time that is available to me, however, I will touch specifically on a strategy that, hopefully, the Minister will soon publish and consult on, as well as on the importance of monitoring and reporting, which are key elements of any strategy going forward.

I also ask that that evaluation look at the greenhouse gas emissions inventories as well as reporting successes because we need to learn from best practice elsewhere. Indeed, I think that it was Mr Blair who referred to the investments that the other jurisdictions in these islands are making and the targets that they are setting. I implore the Minister to include similar asks in his strategy.

I also think that communication is important. It is only over the past few years, I have to confess, that I have learned of the importance of peatlands to decarbonisation, which Mr Wells highlighted. Where I come from, we call it turf rather than peat. In north Antrim, my father-in-law cuts peat, whereas my grandfather cut turf. I used to go with him when he was cutting the turf down in the moss. That is something that we would now frown upon, but, in those days, much of it was borne of necessity, as it provided a fuel that people could not otherwise afford and did not have many other options available to them.

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

**Mrs D Kelly:** Yes, I will.

**Mr Wells:** First, I agree entirely with the Member. However, as we speak this afternoon, there are thousands of acres of this crucial habitat, which has the capacity to absorb vast amounts of carbon, being destroyed for horticulture, for fuel, for development or for drainage. Does she not accept that that is madness, given what we now know about peatlands?

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Member for his intervention because I think that his point is well made. I am not sure whether it is the Minister

who is before an examination with a vote later this week or Mr Wells so that he can be allowed back into the fold.

**Mr Wells:** *[Interruption.] [Laughter.]*

**Mrs D Kelly:** It is interesting.

The Member is right. I know that the Minister is looking at the rural development policy and at how we invest in diversification. Special attention has to be paid to those whose livelihoods depend upon the peatlands. They have to be asked to rethink and to be guardians of much of the land that they own. Communication and education have to be at the centre of a peatlands strategy. I am only finding out about it, yet I grew up with it and loved it and knew about the native species such as the corncrake.

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

**Mrs D Kelly:** If biodiversity and the various species are to be protected and enhanced, communication and cultural values must form part of the Minister's strategy.

**Miss Woods:** Mr Deputy Speaker, I am last but not least. Like others, I thank the emergency services and the local community for their actions in tackling the horrific fires that we all witnessed engulf the Mourne a few weeks ago. I also thank all those who heeded warnings not to go to the area to allow people to do their job and make the area safe. Thanks must also go to those NGOs that continue to fight the good fight against the effects of climate breakdown and biodiversity loss, delivering positive change.

We know how important our woodlands and peatlands are for our environment and the crucial role that they play as part of nature-based solutions. We have also been blessed with a disproportionate share of the world's scarce peatlands, but we have been, and continue to be, poor guardians of that precious resource. The cost of restoring our blanket bogs has been calculated to be less than the costs of dealing with the effects of climate change. Therefore not only can we reduce carbon emissions but we can lock it up, and we can continue to do so in the future, as well as filter our water, control flooding, provide niche habitats for wildlife and enhance our tourist offering. So, what is stopping us? As we have heard, peatlands provide significant natural capital benefits, including carbon storage, water

purification, flood prevention, habitat restoration and improved air quality.

The all-party group on climate action, which I chair and of which, I am glad to say, Mr Wells is a prominent member, recently heard that, in England, a £640 million nature for climate fund has been established, with a significant proportion allocated to peatland restoration. The Scottish Government have allocated £250 million for peatlands over the next 10 years. The Welsh national peatlands action programme 2020-25 committed £1 million a year over the next five years.

In the Republic, too, €108 million is committed to rehabilitating former peat extraction sites. In the presentation that we were given, we were shown a table in which Northern Ireland had question marks beside it. I hope that the Minister can fill in some of the blanks for the House on exactly how much his Department is putting towards peatland recovery, as well as providing an update on where the Department's promised strategy is.

### 3.30 pm

This is not just a job for DAERA. The motion must also extend to the remit of other Ministers, such as the Minister for Infrastructure, as we are dealing with ammonia pollution. Also, the power to grant large-scale peat extraction lies with the planning authorities. Properly addressing the issue will require buy-in from Finance, Economy, Infrastructure and Education, as well as local communities and NGOs. It must be joined up — joined-up thinking, policy-making and funding — to enable nature to start getting joined up again. As we know, nature is remarkably resilient and capable of regeneration, if we just allow it to happen and manage it properly.

We need to plant the right trees in the right places, and there must be a strategic approach to woodland creation that is integrated with other land use considerations. That will involve, crucially, as Ms Armstrong has said, local councils, as part of local development plans and community planning, and other organisations in our communities that are leading the way. Rather than the scattergun approach of offering grants for planting spruce, for example, there needs to be a tree and woodland strategy for Northern Ireland to ensure that the right trees, the native species, are planted in the right places. Of course, peatland and woodland strategies must be part of a nature recovery network.

The debate further shows the need for an independent environmental protection agency for Northern Ireland, and we in the Green Party have consistently called for that New Decade, New Approach commitment to be honoured. The Assembly has even voted in favour of a motion calling for its establishment, but that promise has been kicked down the line to, perhaps, the next mandate. Again, on a crucial matter, the Executive fail to deliver. The need for an IEPA has never been greater. Northern Ireland is the most nature-depleted part of the United Kingdom, which is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. We cannot continue like this. I support the motion.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I call on the Minister, Edwin Poots, to respond to the debate.

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** A significant wildfire started in the Mourne Mountains on Friday 23 April and lasted until Sunday 25 April. I visited the scene on Saturday 24 April and saw at first hand the invaluable role of our emergency services. I took the opportunity to speak to the personnel at the site and saw up close the extremely difficult terrain and the challenging conditions in which they had to work. I also note the practical support provided by the community and businesses to the emergency services.

I gave a detailed oral statement to the Assembly in response to the wildfire on 26 April. In that statement, I paid tribute to the emergency services involved in the response to the wildfire, Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and PSNI, in particular, for the outstanding dedication, professionalism and bravery of the firefighters, who put their health, welfare and, potentially, their lives at risk. I acknowledge the exceptional work of the emergency services to get the fire under control. I also pay tribute to the Forest Service, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the UK coastguard, Irish Coast Guard and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, and I acknowledge the practical support provided by the local community and business. I extend my thanks to and acknowledge the role of the National Trust, Mourne Heritage Trust and Sky Watch NI in assisting with the response to the fire and supporting the emergency services.

Sustainability is at the heart of my Department's thinking, and we need to have a balance in utilising our natural resources to provide much of our food and wood, while not overexploiting that finite natural capital. The Mournes are an excellent example of a natural resource being

used for a multitude of purposes for everyone's benefit. It provides farmland, forestry and other employment. It is also an important resource for recreation, tourism and general employment. The Mournes contain areas of peatland that are in a good ecological state, soak up carbon and assist in combating climate change. That is a key challenge for both DAERA and the Executive generally, and we are taking forward a green growth strategy. Peatlands can alleviate flooding and are an important habitat for many species. Actions that degrade our peatlands, including wildfires and erosion through overgrazing or by walkers, can happen within a relatively short time. People must take responsibility for their actions, and we cannot overestimate the impact that reckless behaviour can have on our environment.

I recently highlighted my concerns to the Minister of Justice, as well as the need for enforcement, legislation and greater cross-departmental working. Unfortunately, it could take several decades of careful management to restore those habitats to a good ecological condition. Given the time it takes to restore habitats, we need a new approach to firebreaks. Prevention is much more effective than cure. On the balance of risk, we must look at policies around controlled burning or flailing of heather etc to create firebreaks. Do we sacrifice, for example, 10 hectares of habitat to save 1,000 hectares of habitat? Those are not, as Mr Hazzard described them, arsonists. They are people who know and manage the environment in an extremely good way.

Another way of managing this is appropriate grazing management. That would help to reduce the amount of fuel available. I highlight the excellent work that my Department has carried out at the CAFRE hill farm at Glenwherry. I encourage any Member to visit that facility and see what is going on there. Since 2008, CAFRE's hill farm has used a gamekeeper to contribute to the management of heather moorland through an annual process of up to 20 controlled small-strip burns, each of up to 0.1 hectare. Using a flail to create a wet firebreak allows an accurate and fast cool burn and results in a habitat mosaic of different heather heights, which is particularly useful for ground-nesting birds. That process has also been used to create protective firebreaks against pockets of tall vegetation on neighbouring land and coniferous forests.

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

**Mr Poots:** Yes, I will.

**Mr Wells:** We are aware of Glenwherry, but that is not what is going on in the Mournes and elsewhere in Northern Ireland. People are not using controlled burning, and they are not using controlled burning outside the nesting season. The first period of hot weather they get, they go out onto the moor and they deliberately set fire to the moor in order to produce the regrowth of grass that they desire. Then they walk away, and it burns all of their land and a lot of other land. That is what we need to control, not what the Minister is suggesting, which, of course, we all welcome.

**Mr Poots:** At this moment in time, anybody burning is breaking the law. From mid-April — I will consider bringing that date forward — they are breaking the law and should be prosecuted. I have raised the issue with NIEA, which has that responsibility. When I was visiting the Mournes, I was taken to a site at Tollymore where an extensive fire had taken place. It extended into other property and did considerable damage, as Mr Wells identified, at Castlewellan in the previous year.

Getting back to the issue, proper controlled management can make a real difference, and we need to ensure that that is available. Peatland management with appropriate grazing — not overgrazing or under-grazing — works much better than wilding, as evidenced in Scotland. When many crofters left the hills, biodiversity decreased. Cutting will not be a reality for many areas. Wetting is a necessity — a necessity — to capture carbon in our peatlands. I hope that Members, when we bring forward the proposals to wet peatlands, will not be coming to me representing constituents, saying, "You can't do it in this area, you can't do it in that area". I suspect that some people will maybe eat their words at that point. Appropriate management, as demonstrated at Glenwherry, has led to an increase in ground-nesting birds across a range of peatland species, including snipe, curlew, lapwing, hen harriers and red grouse, as well as a recovery in Irish hares.

I want to note the investment in our environment, habitats and wildlife via a range of environmental schemes. Only last week, I announced tranche 5 of the EFS. I also announced the opening last week of the environmental challenge fund of £2 million, which will deliver for the environment in respect of habitats and species improvements. We will continue to build on that progress, but we must be honest: we need to deal with the minority of people who do not respect our natural habitat. Whether they be farmers who burn inappropriately or people who leave disposable

barbecues or campfires, they can undo all the good work of others.

In the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, all political parties in Northern Ireland:

*"recognise the need for a coordinated and strategic approach to the challenge of climate change"*

and the loss of biodiversity. It was accepted that:

*"Actions and interventions will be required across a wide range of areas in order to address both the immediate and longer term impacts of climate change"*

and loss of biodiversity

*" in a fair and just way."*

It is in that context that peatland restoration offers a major opportunity for safeguarding biodiversity — so the answer to Mr Wells's first question is yes — increasing carbon storage and sequestration, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions through the Northern Ireland peatlands strategy.

I hope to announce that strategy very soon.

In addition, a large body of evidence exists that demonstrates the value that peatland restoration has on enhancing the delivery of ecosystem services. I mentioned flood attenuation, food production, providing areas for recreation and an understanding of our cultural heritage, all of which provide a significant return on investment. The publication in the near future and the implementation of the Northern Ireland peatland strategy will offer a framework to guide the conservation and restoration of semi-natural peatland habitats in Northern Ireland. It will also reflect the commitments of the 'UK Peatland Strategy', which was published in 2018. Implementation of the strategy will also play an important role in the Department's work on climate change and the wider green growth agenda.

I have no doubt that, had the Assembly not been crashed by Sinn Féin for three years, we would have a peatland strategy, but it was, and we do not. The Department is considering new CAP policies, including agri-environmental policies and support for peatland restoration. Capital works and ongoing management will be considered as those policies develop. Wetting is by far the best means of restoring the peatland habitat.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Minister for giving way. Will the Minister confirm that in drawing up the peatland strategy he is doing so in conjunction with other Ministers, such as the Minister for Infrastructure?

**Mr Poots:** I am glad that the Member mentioned the Minister for Infrastructure. Mr Wells raised a number of points about planning, extracting peat and so forth, but those questions should not be directed to me. They should be directed to the Minister for Infrastructure. I encourage him to lobby that Minister on the issues that he raised. I am not sure what time I have left, so I will move on.

Planting woodland in order to remove CO2 from the atmosphere is a cost-effective way to contribute to the offset of emissions while providing many other social and environmental benefits. In order to support an increase in the rate of afforestation, I launched Forests for our Future, which aims to plant 9,000 hectares of new woodland by 2030. That is in line with the recommendations in the Climate Change Committee's report 'Reducing emissions in Northern Ireland', which was published in 2019. To date, 670,000 trees have been validated under the Forests for our Future programme.

I will comment on an issue that Mr Wells and some others raised about indigenous species only. Yes, I want to see as many indigenous trees planted as possible, but the Sitka spruce and other coniferous trees have the capacity to capture carbon. When they are young, they capture carbon in a very substantial way. They are harvested and reused for pencils, fencing posts and all sorts of wood. That is not a bad thing. We will encourage as much planting of indigenous trees as possible, but that does not mean that we will not accept any planting of other trees, because they have and serve a purpose. Whilst they will be harvested and replanted, they will continue to engage in carbon sequestration, so it is not all bad, even though I have a preference for the native species.

I recently published the findings of a forest visitor survey that was conducted in 2019. It showed that annual visits to forests increased from 4.7 million in 2014 to almost 9 million. Forests provide many opportunities for people to meet, exercise and enjoy the beautiful surroundings. During the last year, Forest Service and its partner organisations experienced a further increase in visits to our forests due to the significant investment that has been made in forestry recreation facilities in recent years and as a result of people wanting

to enjoy our countryside while living under COVID-19 restrictions.

Northern Ireland's forests and woodland face many threats. Some of those are related to the natural environment and, therefore, are interrelated in complex ways. Others are due to the behaviour of people. Protecting forests and woodland requires careful planning and collaborative working across effective partnerships. My Department continues to implement surveillance and monitoring plans for the most damaging pests and pathogens of trees and reviews the pest-specific response plans in the event of a finding. Work continues on importing controls in order to maintain protected zone status and horizon scanning for new and emerging threats. In response to the risk of fire, the Department's Forest Service annually reviews and implements its emergency fire plan. That was operated effectively within the SLA arrangements with the NI Fire and Rescue Service, and it proved to be effective in the operation to control the wildfire in the Mourne and a significant forest fire in Knocks forest in County Fermanagh during the same weekend.

I am pleased to note that the domestic and world demand for timber construction, fencing and packaging products remained strong through the pandemic and that the Northern Ireland wood-processing sector continues to build on its competitive market position. That is ongoing and necessary. Much has been achieved, and much more is to be achieved. I will not be behind the door in ensuring that we do that work to restore our peatlands.

### 3.45 pm

Rightly, Miss Woods indicated what is going on in the Republic of Ireland. We did not have the same level of industrial harvesting of our peatlands. There has been some but not on the massive scale that it happened in many areas in the Republic of Ireland. We have to meet this challenge. We have to recognise that our tree planting must be in the right locations as well. We should not be planting trees in peatland areas where there is the potential for the trees to take away the moisture and water, thereby causing further drying of the peatlands. We know what needs to be done.

I am delighted that Ms Ennis, on behalf of the Department of Finance, announced that Mr Murphy is to provide substantial funding to me. I look forward to receiving the letter, and my Department will ensure that the money is properly and appropriately spent. I am glad that she made that announcement today.

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

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** For clarity, has the Minister given way?

**Mr Poots:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** As I said earlier, it is like trying to hit a moving target as the Member moves on to greater and higher things. He said that he did not have time to take an intervention, but there are a few seconds left. One point that he needs to deal with, and the House is, I think, unanimous on this today, is that he must not use taxpayers' money to promote the planting of exotic foreign species in Northern Ireland. By all means, if people want to plant Sitka spruce, they can, but not by using his money, the Department's money or taxpayers' money. That has to be the way forward.

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for reiterating his point.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I call Patsy McGlone to make his winding-up speech on the debate. The Member has up to 10 minutes.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank all who contributed for their input into a very thoughtful debate. A number of key themes ran through it. The first was specific to the fire on the Mournes, the recklessness of those who caused it and the damage done. Members spoke about the damage to the future environment and how that can, in some way, be redeemed by strategies down the line. Multiple Members thanked the various services involved — rightly so — including DAERA, the NIEA, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service in particular, the police, community groups, local farmers and landowners, and, of course, young Charlie Thomson, who was mentioned a couple of times by Sinéad Bradley.

The final key theme was the need for cross-departmental strategies as a way forward for peatland protection, tourism promotion and the educational requirements contained in those strategies. My colleague Colin McGrath described the beauty of the Mournes and their tourism potential, and he outlined what was required to protect the flora. He mentioned the input of local organisations and the support that farmers require to preserve the habitats. He referred to the international seminar on wildfires that took place in Newry. He talked about the frequency of those wildfires and the damage to the flora and fauna. Like many others, he recorded his support for the emergency services.

Supporting the motion, William Irwin also referred to the blaze in the mountains and the efforts made by local people. He expressed his gratitude to the emergency services. He referred to the woodlands resource and the Minister's strategy for tree planting. He talked about the publication of a peatland strategy, which the Minister later referred to, and its importance in tackling climate change.

Likewise, Declan McAleer, Chair of the AERA Committee, thanked the emergency services. He referred to the important environmental aspect of habitats and especially to the problem of the damage done by these fires — whether deliberately or by accident — in his constituency, which placed a risk on biodiversity or, indeed, eliminated biodiversity in those areas. That biodiversity may not be restored, or it may take a long time to be restored. He also referred to the implications of the compensatory amounts to assist farmers with the burden of the cost of repairs and to the risk to life, property, farm businesses and natural habitat.

Rosemary Barton, in favour of the motion, spoke about the heartbreaking sight of the fire in the Mournes and thanked all those who were involved in at least trying to stop it and to retrieve some grounds that otherwise would have been jeopardised and deeply at risk. She referred to local community groups and the need for the preservation and protection of areas. Of course, as I expect her to, she also called for education to be part of the process so that people who use those beautiful locations behave responsibly and are aware of the environment around them.

John Blair brought us to the realities and practicalities of Governments putting their money where their mouth is. He talked about the restoration of 35,000 hectares in England. Similarly, Rachel Woods referred to the investment in Scotland and Wales and, likewise, about €108 million for restorations in the Republic and for the schemes to bring about new environments in areas that were bespoiled or likely to be at risk. That is very important.

Maurice Bradley looked ahead to the future of the environment and talked about the preservation of the planet when he referred to giving our "children and our children's children" a better environment. Being an experienced and seasoned fisherman, he knows the implications that that has for some of our waterways. Philip McGuigan referred to problems in localities in his constituency, between Loughguile and the glens, where fires caused environmental carnage. He spoke in

favour of rural communities being custodians of the environment.

Harry Harvey painted a picture of the blazing Mourne against the night sky. In some circumstances, that would be regarded as poetic or picturesque, but it was far from it; the reality was the damage being done on the other side of the vista. He referred to greater use of firebreaks, funding for the required recovery and the need to meet net zero commitments. Likewise, Sinéad Ennis referred to meeting the National Trust, along with her colleagues. She acknowledged the efforts of the Fire and Rescue Service and the local communities. She called on the Minister for the Economy to increase investment in tourism and job creation in the Mourne area. She referred to the storage of carbon in peatlands. She also referred to the common theme of whether the gorse fire was started deliberately and about the need for protections and a draft peatlands strategy.

Sinéad Bradley thanked the firefighters for bringing the fire under control and talked about the challenges that local communities face as a result of the fire. She referred to the fact that, while this last 12 months has been a very sad period for many due to COVID and the problems arising from it — I have been in touch with a number of families — it has nevertheless allowed many people to reconnect with nature and to become more aware of the nature around them. She spoke about the need for education. Some people have been self-educating and have been to places that they have never been to before. Others need to be educated so that they are aware of the risk that they can potentially bring with them.

Mr Wells, in very sharp and clear form, referred to the need for peatlands, which can be a vast store for carbon. He questioned the issue of ongoing planning permission for peatlands. He referred to afforestation and, of course, made the point that the use of foreign exotic alien species should be avoided when public money is being used.

He queried why, in situations in which DAERA is involved, along with emergency services such as the police, and allegations have been made about someone being a culprit or being responsible for, in effect, arson, that matter is not taken further. He also called for stronger enforcement measures from the Department in cases in which blazes have been started deliberately.

Kellie Armstrong referred to herself as a committed tree hugger, and, again, her

contribution had that awareness of the importance of nature and our surrounds. She outlined her party's stance — ours is similar — on having an independent environment agency. There is the whole question of woodlands' import for planning. With those woodlands, where there is planning permission, it may not fall immediately within the Minister's remit, unless the NIEA has a crossover role there. I am not quite sure. Woodlands need to be protected as part of the planning process, however. She paid tribute to the Fire and Rescue Service.

My colleague Dolores Kelly referred to Doire Mór. County Doire, where I am from, was, in fact, once upon a time, covered with those large oak trees. They have been removed. That was many, many centuries ago. Nevertheless, it will be useful to see at least a modicum of regrowth and rebirth of those woodlands in many areas.

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

**Mr McGlone:** Certainly.

**Mr Poots:** Will the Member support me in seeking to allow oak trees to be imported from Great Britain once again? They are currently banned under the protocol.

**Mr McGlone:** I am sure that, like with everything else, the Minister will find a way in which to raise that issue at the Joint Committee, at which all such relevant issues are supposed to be raised. I wish him well in that. I am sure that many of the issues will be resolved through that mechanism, because that is why it was set up in the first place.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

**Mr McGlone:** OK. There were numerous other contributions, including one from Rachel Woods. The Minister responded to the debate by outlining his strategies, and I thank him for that. He referred to green growth. He also referred to CAFRE and its importance. I support that, and his announcement earlier today —

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

**Mr McGlone:** — was very welcome news. He also referred to planting woodlands.

In conclusion, I thank Members for their support for the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

*That this Assembly pays tribute to the heroic efforts by those emergency service personnel from across these islands and the local community who responded to the recent wildfires in the Mournes; notes the importance of preserving the natural environment for improving air quality, biodiversity, carbon capture and combating the climate emergency; further notes the importance of both rewilding and protecting peatlands in tackling the climate emergency; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to produce fully resourced strategies and implementation plans to protect, preserve and enhance our peatlands and woodlands without further delay.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

**4.00 pm**

*Motion made:*

*That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Speaker.]*

## Adjournment

### Enniskillen Bypass and A4 Upgrade

**Mr Speaker:** The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes.

**Ms Dolan:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I secured the Adjournment debate a fortnight ago, but the Minister for Infrastructure waited until this morning to release a statement on the same issue. That undermines the role of MLAs and the authority of the Chamber to hold Ministers to account. I ask the Speaker's Office to look into this to see whether proper procedure and protocol were followed.

**Mr Speaker:** This is the third time that the matter has been raised with me today. Members, and the Minister, of course, will know that I have written on a number of occasions throughout the last year, and since the start of the mandate, when, in my opinion, due respect was not paid to the Assembly. Most of that was inadvertent — there was no intention to disrespect the Assembly — but the net effect of not bringing statements to the Assembly or sticking to Assembly procedures was to show discourtesy at times.

I have to say, and have repeatedly said, that once I raised the matter with the Executive last year, all those respects to the Assembly were adhered to quite strictly, which pleased me. We then had a long time, in difficult circumstances, when all Ministers adhered to the normal respect for the Assembly and the rights of Members. However, the matter was raised with me twice this morning, regarding two Ministers.

I say directly to the Minister that, having seen that her statement was issued a number of hours ago, in advance of the Adjournment debate that was scheduled for this afternoon in the Order Paper, I can understand why a Member would feel aggrieved. It is not for me to judge why that happened, but I will write to the Executive again because I want to make sure that Ministers reflect on when they issue statements, particularly on sitting days and

when the Minister is scheduled to come to a particular debate to make a statement.

We all know that Members do not often have an opportunity such as an Adjournment debate, or even a motion, to air an issue. I understand why Ms Dolan feels aggrieved. I ask the Minister, and all Ministers, to reflect on how they conduct business, particularly on plenary days. We will leave it at that.

**Ms Dolan:** Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, for facilitating the debate today on a topic that my constituents and I feel very strongly about. I start by sending my condolences to my party and constituency colleague Seán Lynch MLA, and his family, on the recent death of his brother Brendan.

The Enniskillen bypass, the upgrading of the A4 road between Ballygawley and Enniskillen and the upgrading of the A4 road between Enniskillen and Belcoo are extremely important and need to be delivered without delay. Today's announcement that the Department for Infrastructure is progressing to the next stage of the Enniskillen bypass is very welcome. If anything, it proves at least that Adjournment debates such as this work, putting pressure on Ministers to listen to MLAs and to the people whom we represent.

I have a number of questions on the Minister's announcement. How long will it take to make the direction, vesting and bridge orders for the bypass scheme? I remind the Minister that the people of Fermanagh have waited too long as it stands. Moreover, considering the £722 million capital budget that the Department received this year, why was the bypass not included in this year's budget? The scheme is about £30 million and is huge value for money. Very little of that capital budget makes its way to Fermanagh as it is, and the Department has no maintenance budget going to Fermanagh for rail, motorways or dual carriageways, because Fermanagh has none.

Then, add in the fact that Fermanagh and Omagh district has the highest number of outstanding road repairs, with 1,339 surface defects.

The Department for Infrastructure is underspending and underinvesting massively in Fermanagh. In response to my question for written answer in March, the Minister stated that she had asked her officials to complete the work necessary to allow her to arrive at a decision on how the scheme should proceed. I hope that the Adjournment debate will help to focus the Minister's mind on the bypass. The

project has been ongoing for 15 years: let us make this the final year.

I will now address the need for the upgrading of the entire A4 road from Ballygawley to Enniskillen and then onwards from Enniskillen to Belcoo, where it joins the N16 to Sligo. The two stretches of road, with the bypass in between, are like a three-legged stool. The bypass is welcome, but a one-legged stool will not stand on its own. It is well known and statistically proven that border areas perform poorly in comparison with other areas on the island of Ireland. The standout facts of that are economic productivity lagging behind the national average; a lower share of high-value economic sectors, which are more resilient in economic downturns; a higher share of manufacturing and construction sector jobs, which are more likely to be hit by economic downturns; and a so-called brain drain of young and talented people from the border areas.

Improving the A4 transport link would have a transformative effect on Fermanagh. Obviously, transport itself cannot resolve all of Fermanagh's economic difficulties. Any road infrastructure improvements have to be accompanied by investment in broadband and mobile coverage, Invest NI investment and education and skills development, which we are beginning to see with investment in the South West College in Enniskillen. Transport improvements, however, are vital to the economic sustainability of Fermanagh. The upgrading of the A4 is a necessity that the Department and the Minister for Infrastructure cannot ignore any longer.

As I mentioned, Fermanagh does not have even one mile of dual carriageway. We must be the only county in Ireland in that position. We are not getting a fair allocation of the Department for Infrastructure's budget, and that needs to change. Extending the dual carriageway from Ballygawley to Enniskillen would improve business confidence in Fermanagh and South Tyrone; encourage the skilled pool of workers currently resident there to remain and encourage others to return; facilitate and support the regeneration of the local economy; assist in the development and growth of indigenous industries; and reduce the misconception of peripherality, particularly amongst tourists and businesses.

Hundreds of people leave their Fermanagh homes for work elsewhere and never return. That results in rural depopulation, which leads to several other consequences that affect rural communities socially and economically. Fermanagh has been neglected for too long,

and we will not stand for it any longer. Some people snigger at how Fermanagh has been ignored, but I find it downright disgraceful and an insult to the people whom I represent. We have the worst broadband, the worst roads and possibly the worst sewerage infrastructure, all of which has a detrimental impact on the local economy and the opportunities available to us. The A4 upgrade and the Enniskillen bypass are not a magic bullet that will cure all the ills affecting Fermanagh. However, they would be a massive help and a significant boost to the area.

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council recently adopted a position calling for the upgrade of the A4 to dual carriageway. The Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) has highlighted the socio-economic benefits of improvements to the A4-N16 transport corridor. Sinn Féin has campaigned on the issue for too many years to count. It is now time for the Minister to listen, if not to Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, ICBAN, me or my party, then, please, to Fermanagh's residents, businesses and its native sons and daughters who have to live in Belfast, Dublin, London and New York, to name a few, because of decades of underfunding of infrastructure.

**Mr Speaker:** Given the number who have asked to speak, we can say that Members will have up to eight minutes to speak.

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for securing the Adjournment debate. Like her, I was rather surprised by the statement coming out today, but, of course, I welcome the announcement contained in it, because the southern bypass needs to be pushed on and proceeded with.

It is a significant announcement for us in the south-west, and it has been long awaited by those who travel in the area for work or leisure and by the residents of that wonderful part of the world. I have been pursuing this project for most of my time as an MLA for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Some 15 of the last 18 years have been spent pursuing it. Now that my time as an MLA is coming to an end, I am very pleased to see the project move ahead.

Anyone who is local to Fermanagh or who has driven into Enniskillen will understand how beneficial this piece of infrastructure will be. Congestion and gridlock have become commonplace in Enniskillen during busy periods. I am sure that Members who are not from Fermanagh will know that that is the case as they travel through. That congestion does not help our environment — I know that the

Minister is very concerned about that part of her portfolio — or our economy. The new infrastructure is desperately needed. Uniquely among roads projects, it is welcomed by an overwhelming number of people in the area, with minimal objection to it. I have always found it difficult to understand why it could not proceed at a faster pace. However, it is proceeding now. I have been in touch with the Minister on a number of occasions, and we are due to meet again in early June.

We must keep pushing ahead towards the delivery of this project, and also that of the Sligo-Enniskillen greenway. I hope that it will link with the new piece of roads infrastructure. I will continue to support the greenway project after I leave office because, like the bypass, it will bring real and tangible benefits to Fermanagh and to the northern counties of the Republic of Ireland. I have supported for a number of years the idea of using the route of the former railway line from Enniskillen to Sligo to encourage citizens to enjoy the countryside while walking or cycling. The proposed Sligo-Enniskillen greenway connects the main greenway network in the Republic of Ireland with our growing greenway network in Northern Ireland. It also connects the Wild Atlantic Way with the Erne waterways. It will, no doubt, enhance our tourism offering in County Fermanagh. I am very passionate about that.

I am, and will remain, anxious to see Fermanagh, and tourism, prosper. Tourism is a great driver for prosperity in the county. The Minister will know that I mention the greenway because the last section of the greenway in Northern Ireland will end on that southern bypass. I hope, and ask the Minister to confirm, that she will take that into account in her design of the roadway and bridge over the River Erne so that cycle lanes and walkways are included in the new piece of infrastructure. We have waited on it for a very long time, but this is a good day and we should welcome it.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Member for securing this important and timely debate. Many of my colleagues in the west are delighted to see the progress on the Enniskillen bypass that the Minister has announced. This is a long-awaited project, and it will mean a lot to many people in the area that the SDLP has once again put the needs of local people, in Enniskillen and beyond, first. We should all commend the Minister for her focus and tireless work to make progress on these schemes, particularly at a time when she has been so busy restoring services across the North and building back better from COVID-19.

We in the SDLP went into government to play our part in delivering the change that our citizens deserve. True to her word, our Minister has stepped up with this project to tackle regional imbalance, improve the economy and better connect communities, while improving road safety.

After three years of no government and years of dither and delay from others, it is great to have a SDLP Minister who is prepared to work, deliver and get change done for our communities. I agree with the proposer of the topic, Ms Dolan, when she says that the people of Fermanagh have waited too long. That is strange, coming from a Member whose party colleagues held the post on at least two occasions in recent years but we did not see earlier progress. I look forward to the Member's support for our Minister asking the Finance Minister to speed up the implementation and delivery of the project.

#### 4.15 pm

I know that everyone will welcome the announcement that the Minister is not just delivering a road scheme but seeking to introduce measures to green our infrastructure in our towns when doing the big road schemes. Today's announcement that active travel measures will be introduced to Enniskillen town is much welcomed, and I know that those measures will be a huge benefit to the local community, which can now look forward to a walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure that will bring health and well-being opportunities as well as better, cleaner, greener connectivity choices for citizens. Those are important measures, particularly given our debates today and yesterday on the challenge of the climate emergency.

Whilst I primarily want to congratulate the Minister, I also ask if she can provide further information on the active travel measures and if she foresees benefits for the local economy and tourism as well as for health and well-being; indeed, Mrs Foster referred to those. In thinking of those in my constituency and in other areas across the North who want to see more active, greener and cleaner infrastructure in our communities, will she further commit to more measures across Northern Ireland? I think in particular of the Ulster canal greenway project.

I thank the Minister for her time today, and I look forward to further information in her remarks. I also thank Ms Dolan for securing the debate.

**Mrs Barton:** Today's written ministerial statement on the Enniskillen southern bypass has maybe avoided some of the debate on that part of the discussion. I place on the record my welcome of today's announcement by the Minister for Infrastructure that the Department will now publish the formal environmental impact assessment notice to proceed and make the direction, vesting and bridge orders for the Enniskillen southern bypass scheme. Ulster Unionist Party representatives have long campaigned for that important scheme. Former Minister Danny Kennedy drove the project forward when he announced the preferred route almost 10 years ago. It is disappointing that it has taken so long to get to this stage.

When constructed, the Enniskillen southern bypass will provide major benefits by improving safety and journey times and for the strategic traffic that passes through the town. It will also provide significant traffic management and environmental improvements for Enniskillen town centre. It will be a significant investment and benefit for the area when it is eventually constructed. I trust that the Department is looking beyond this part of the process and setting a timescale for when the development on the ground can commence and for a completion date. Maybe the Minister can give us some indication of those timescales today.

We now join a long and historical list of politicians calling for work on the A4 upgrade, which is for the economic benefit of Fermanagh and the Clogher valley. It is vital that genuine plans are put in place to progress a scheme that upgrades the A4. I recall a document from 2010 from the Department for Regional Development, which is now, of course, the Department for Infrastructure, that was entitled the 'Regional Strategic Transport Network'. The plans in that included key strategic transport corridors, link corridors and the road element. One of the sections in it was a south-western corridor that included a three-and-a-half-kilometre, two-by-one bypass of Fivemiletown.

I am not sure what the community of Fivemiletown and the surrounding area thought of the plan at the time. The Department's investment delivery plan for roads estimated that the scheme in that south-western policy proposal would be delivered within the period from 2013 to 2018. Obviously, that did not happen. Indeed, I have never heard it mentioned since. I look forward to comments on that.

Fermanagh and Tyrone do not have any rail connections. Fermanagh does not have any motorways or dual carriageways. There are

many strong and well-established businesses in Fermanagh. The infrastructure to and from the county is extremely poor. In order to provide help and support to the local economy, there is a genuine need to upgrade that transport infrastructure.

Some years ago, a cross-border group, which was facilitated by Fermanagh and Leitrim councils, looked at the A4/N16 Enniskillen to Sligo road upgrade. The feasibility study might even have been produced by that group. However, it did not seem to progress any further. Any support to improve the transport infrastructure in the south-west would be most welcome.

**Mr Gildernew:** I welcome the opportunity to discuss the A4 southern bypass. I thank my colleague Jemma Dolan for bringing the issue to the Floor. As she said, Sinn Féin has been campaigning for the delivery of the A4 southern bypass for years. I very much welcome Jemma's bringing a focus to it and the announcement from the Minister, notwithstanding the outstanding questions that Jemma has flagged in relation to that.

I would like to extend my sympathy to my constituency colleague Seán Lynch and the entire Lynch clan on the tragic loss of their brother Brendan.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Gildernew:** Yes.

**Mrs D Kelly:** My party wishes to be associated with the condolences to Mr Lynch and his family. I know that he lost his father last year as well. I am sure that it has been a terrible time, particularly with COVID and all the restrictions that that imposes on a family.

**Mr Gildernew:** Go raibh maith agat. I am sure that the family will welcome that.

The bypass scheme seeks to deliver a new road along the A4, from the Dublin Road to the Sligo Road. The benefits of the scheme include providing a strategic link for traffic to bypass Enniskillen town centre; reducing town centre congestion and enhancing the town centre environment; reduced noise and air pollution in Enniskillen town; improving the local economy; improved journey times; and improved road safety for all road users.

I join colleagues in reflecting on the fact that Fermanagh and South Tyrone has some of the most dynamic food-manufacturing and

engineering companies in the North. We also have some of the best tourism offerings, yet we continue to suffer from underinvestment in infrastructure in our part of the world. As mentioned, there is no rail, and there is not a single mile of motorway in Fermanagh. Increasingly, there are gaps in broadband provision. All those elements are essential to our population's health and well-being, just as they are to populations elsewhere. We should accept and have nothing less than what is available elsewhere.

Currently, Enniskillen offers the only strategic east-west crossing between Upper Lough Erne and Lower Lough Erne. As such, the town suffers from the congestion caused by a combination of local and strategic road traffic. The existing road network has insufficient capacity for current levels of traffic. That results in unreliable journey times for all traffic, driver frustration and dissatisfaction with the town centre environment. Therefore, the A4 Enniskillen bypass scheme seeks to provide a new link for traffic between the A4 Dublin Road and the A4 Sligo Road. It is widely supported by the local population. By tackling the bottleneck on that section of road, the upgrade would allow businesses to benefit from improved access to their shops and enjoy the improved journey times that would come with that. In fact, it has been estimated that the scheme would improve average journey times by around 50% and take 40% of the traffic on the A4 out of Enniskillen town centre.

The total cost of the bypass scheme is estimated to be in the region of £25 million to £30 million.

I welcome that investment. I also endorse the views of my colleague Jemma Dolan and others that we absolutely need those schemes to be prioritised and progressed. Schemes like those, along with the A5 and others, are crucial to ensuring that our region is sustainable and served on an equal basis as everywhere else.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Minister. Minister, if you wish, you can have over half an hour.  
*[Laughter.]* For some reason, all the same, I do not think that you will need to take that.

**Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. First, I offer my condolences to the Lynch family at this difficult time. I thank Ms Dolan for securing the Adjournment debate on the Enniskillen bypass and the A4, and I thank all Members who were present for the debate.

As Members will be aware, today I announced my intention to proceed with the Enniskillen southern bypass scheme and to make the statutory orders. In line with advice, I made that announcement through a written ministerial statement and a subsequent press release to make sure that Members across the House were given prior notice of my decision.

Since being appointed as Minister, I have made it clear that my focus is on doing what I can to improve the lives of people in Northern Ireland. I have made clear my commitment to tackling regional imbalance, improving the economy, job prospects and prosperity, connecting communities and improving road safety. I share the frustrations that have been expressed by Ms Dolan and others. It has taken too long. I also agree with the analysis that there has been historical underinvestment in that part of the North and that much more should have been done. This is the first time that the SDLP has held the Infrastructure portfolio, and it is committed to doing everything that it can to deliver for people who live across the North, particularly in those areas that have been left behind.

I listened with interest to Members' comments and the issues that they raised. From my engagement with businesses and the local community in Fermanagh, it is clear that the delivery of the Enniskillen southern bypass project and the need to consider upgrades to the A4 route is of huge importance to the region, as it is for me, as the Minister for Infrastructure. I am, therefore, pleased that the developmental phase of the project has been completed with my announcement today.

Ms Dolan asked questions about the time frame for the completion of the statutory orders. My officials are working at pace to ensure that all the work that is required on due diligence is completed. However, we can now proceed to enabling works, which will allow us to move to the procurement and construction phases. I will continue to engage with the Finance Minister and my Executive colleagues to maximise the funding that I can secure to ensure that we can deliver this important project in the quickest possible time frame.

I acutely recognise that the scheme is significant to the town of Enniskillen and the surrounding area. Indeed, I am aware that the scheme is being considered for inclusion in the Mid South West growth deal. The proposed Enniskillen southern bypass is 2.1 kilometres in length, with additional tie-ins to the existing road network at the A4 Dublin Road and the A509 Derrylin Road by way of two new at-grade

roundabouts. To complement the bypass, active travel provision has also been incorporated into the design, and I asked my officials to ensure that we maximise the opportunities for active travel along the bypass route and, importantly, in Enniskillen town centre.

The scheme will provide a new transport link to the southern side of the town, improving the connection between the A4 Dublin Road and the A4 Sligo Road, and offer a number of benefits that Members have rightly identified. It will reduce traffic congestion in Enniskillen; provide a new transport link along the A4 from the Dublin Road to the Sligo Road; facilitate a more efficient movement of traffic in and around Enniskillen; reduce noise and air pollution in the town; and provide further opportunities to improve active travel and people-centred place-shaping in the town centre for those who want to walk, wheel and cycle to work and for leisure purposes.

It would be helpful to remind the House of the statutory procedures governing major road schemes such as the Enniskillen southern bypass, which are set out in the Roads Order 1993. The order enables the three strands of the statutory procedures — the environmental assessment, the direction order and the vesting order — to be taken forward concurrently and to be published in the public domain at the same time.

#### **4.30 pm**

Following the public consultation on the draft orders between April and May 2018, my Department decided to progress the scheme without the need for a public inquiry, because it was widely recognised that there was general support for the scheme and wide recognition of the benefits that it would deliver.

I hope that Members will appreciate that the Department must follow due process with diligence and that it takes time to progress a scheme such as this through the statutory processes.

Ms Dolan, Mrs Barton and others raised the issue of upgrades to the A4. I fully appreciate the strategic importance of the A4 and its function as a part of the south-western key transport corridor. My officials are preparing a new suite of transport plans, and the first in line for completion is the regional strategic transport network transport plan. The transport plan will set out future investment and improvement for our strategic transport networks by road, rail and bus to 2035, and it will reflect my ongoing

commitment to improving connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities right across the North. The plan will help inform my priorities for future development of the main road networks, including the A4, and I expect to publish the draft plan for consultation towards the end of this year. Views from key stakeholders and members of the public on the upgrades to the A4 key transport corridor will be most welcome.

I must also point out that my Department has put significant investment into the A4 over recent years in the form of resurfacing and improvement schemes. Over £2 million has been spent in the past three years. There are also plans to undertake further resurfacing work, and we are looking at the potential of providing cycleways adjacent to the A4 from Maguiresbridge to Brookeborough and from Clogher to Augher.

I will turn now to some specific points that Members raised that I have not so far addressed. As I said, I agree with the frustrations being expressed by Ms Dolan. I agree with her that it is a disgrace that people in Fermanagh have been left like this for so long. The challenge to be met is what we will do now to turn the situation around and deliver the change that those communities deserve.

I welcome the fact that Mrs Foster positively received the statement today, and I know that she is among Members across the House who have been campaigning for some time. I agree with her that this is a good day. I also agree with her that the new infrastructure will deliver economic benefits and critically important environmental benefits. I believe that the bypass but also the transformation that we can ensure takes place in Enniskillen town centre will act as a catalyst for the growth of local indigenous tourism, which is really important, not least in our recovery from COVID.

Mrs Foster also referenced the Enniskillen to Sligo greenway. I reassure her and Members across the House of my commitment to the development of that greenway, and greenways right across the North, and that is why I established the new £20 million blue-green fund. Mrs Foster was my accompanying Minister at the most recent North/South Ministerial Council transport sector meeting, at which Minister Ryan and I discussed that particular greenway and committed to ensuring that we work with each other, that our officials work together and that my officials continue to work with local councils to ensure that we get the schemes progressed to delivery. I also

agree on the need to ensure connectivity for our greenway network right across the island.

Mrs Kelly spoke about the importance of the project in tackling regional imbalance, and I wholeheartedly agree. She spoke about the importance of meeting the needs of local people. That is what we are here to do. She also talked about the positive changes and benefits that will be delivered by enhancing Enniskillen town centre. I agree with her that that is very important for our green recovery from COVID. We should be doing what we can to improve road safety, to improve our air quality and to ensure that more of our citizens have safe choices for engaging in active travel.

She asked about the work that I intend to take forward in other constituencies, and I can assure her that, while I am finalising my budget for this financial year, I remain very much committed to doing what I can to enhance our blue-green infrastructure. I know that there are many opportunities for us to do that in her constituency, so I look forward to working with her and local councils.

Mrs Barton talked about the importance of having the debate today, and I know that she has campaigned long and hard, as have others, for this piece of infrastructure. I agree with her that we need to take a holistic look at the transport opportunities and at the connectivity for that part of Northern Ireland. She will be aware that, together with Minister Eamon Ryan in the South, I have announced a new all-island strategic rail review, which is the first of its kind. It will look at where we can improve existing rail networks but also at providing new opportunities for rail connectivity. I am mindful that, in her constituency, there are huge gaps that we need to try to address, and I encourage her to feed into the consultation later this year on the road, rail and bus opportunities and connectivity.

Mr Gildernew talked about the multiple benefits to be derived from this piece of infrastructure, including enhanced journey times and road safety improvements. He also referenced the air quality improvements that will come from it.

I reiterate my appreciation to Ms Dolan for bringing the Adjournment topic to the House and to all Members for their contributions. I was pleased to make the decision to proceed with the scheme and notify all Members of it today. This is an important day for the people of Fermanagh and all those elected to represent them. It is a key step in the development of this significant scheme, which seeks, as Members have said, to reduce traffic congestion for

strategic and local road users in Enniskillen town centre.

I am very aware of how important the A4 Enniskillen southern bypass will be for the many people and businesses who have expressed their support for it, and I am committed to doing all that I can to deliver the scheme. I will work with the Finance Minister and my Executive colleagues to secure the necessary funding as quickly as possible so that we can deliver the project and improve road safety, journey times, air quality and noise levels and provide active travel opportunities. We now have the potential to reshape Enniskillen town centre to create a sustainable, liveable place where people have the space to stay, meet, shop and walk and cycle safely.

*Adjourned at 4.36 pm.*

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