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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 11 June 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Members' Statements

Mr Speaker: The first item in the Order Paper is Members' statements, and the usual rules apply.

BBC NI: Sign Language Withdrawal

Mrs Cameron: Last week, seemingly without consultation or notice, BBC Northern Ireland announced that it was immediately withdrawing the provision of sign language from its televised lunchtime bulletins. I find that to be a thoroughly depressing move from the BBC that will cause an even greater sense of isolation among the deaf community in Northern Ireland.

Over the past few years, I have had cause to engage at length with many deaf people in the community and, indeed, at family gatherings. I have to say that I had very much underestimated how disadvantaged that group is in society. It caused me to raise questions in this place about how we, as elected Members, interact with the deaf community here and in our constituency offices. I was pleased, therefore, to hear my friend the Communities Minister, Gordon Lyons, announce plans for a sign language Bill and more interpreters for the deaf in Northern Ireland.

There is perhaps no organisation as vocal in its cry for equality and representation of minority groups as the BBC, and yet, to suit its internal agenda, it removes a much-loved and much-needed service from viewers, who are told to go online instead. That is hardly an example of care in the community, is it? I will write to the BBC on behalf of those constituents, and I encourage other Members to do likewise. We really cannot let such a decision by a publicly funded body go unchallenged.

International Day of Play

Mrs Dillon: I have just come from an event upstairs marking International Day of Play. We are often accused of not playing fairly or well

with one another in the Chamber, but, in truth, this is a really important day. It is important for our children and young people, because, as was said at the event, they make up 25% of our population but 100% of our future. Play is really important for their education and mental well-being and for giving them the skills for their future for the jobs that they will be able to do in our economy. Most importantly, however, play is about their well-being and resilience. We need to ensure that every child has access to play. That means that all children, no matter where they live, what their abilities or disabilities are or what challenges they have in life, should have the capacity to play. We as a Government must support them and have a policy and a framework in place to ensure that every child has accessible play.

My local council, Mid Ulster District Council, now has a policy in place to ensure that there is at least one item of accessible equipment in any new play park or in play parks where refurbishment is being carried out. That is nowhere near enough, however, for the children in our community who need more accessible play. We therefore must ensure that there are better policies from my council and every other council across the North. Additional funding is not required for most of this. Most of it is simply about a change of mindset and culture. It is about our belief in the importance of play for our children. If we want to have a better future, because — remember what I said — children are 100% of our future, and if we want them and, in turn, everyone coming behind them to have a better future, we need to take the importance of play seriously. We need to have a policy and a framework.

We are behind every other part of these islands, and that is not good enough. At one time, we were ahead of some parts. We were ahead of Scotland, but Scotland is way ahead of us now. That is not good enough, so we need to look at that. The last time that a policy framework was in place was in 2006. Perhaps we do not need something new. Perhaps we just need to look at what was there, at why it was not implemented, at what was

implemented and at what we can do better. It is about a change of mindset from all of us in the Chamber, because we are the leadership, and if we have a change of mindset and culture, we will find that that will roll down into our education establishments, the health system and every other part of life: our economy, our communities and our justice system. Play is important, and we need to take it seriously.

Carnlough Controlled Integrated Primary School

Mr Donnelly: I congratulate Carnlough Controlled Integrated Primary School, which, last Friday, was awarded the excellence in integrated education award (EIEA). That small rural school on the east Antrim coast transformed to integrated status in 2001, the first to do so in the millennium. Since then, for more than 20 years, it has been a leading light in the field of integrated education in the area. The school provides education for children between the ages of four and 11 from all faith or no faith backgrounds, and it is committed to providing the highest standard of education for every pupil. The staff and pupils celebrated winning the award by putting on a fantastic performance in the local library of the Dr Seuss classic 'The Butter Battle Book' and having a day of play at the school. The principal, Miss Claire Mulholland, and her staff and governors are absolutely committed to the holistic development of each child in their school. They are very proud of their integrated status and live out every day the values for which integration stands.

According to the Integrated Education Fund (IEF):

"integration symbolises the new Northern Ireland where the community works side by side for the benefit of all."

In assessing the school for the award, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) stated:

"Carnlough Controlled Integrated Primary School is an excellent example of an integrated primary school in action. Its ethos is strong and is visible in all areas of school life. The role of the school in the village and community is notable. All staff, pupils and parents shared a pride in their school. The leadership of the principal is integral to the positive relationships and a warm, inclusive environment for the children and adults alike."

There is a specific pledge in the Good Friday Agreement:

"to facilitate and encourage integrated education"

as an essential part of creating:

"a culture of tolerance at every level of society".

The teachers, children, parents and governors of Carnlough Controlled Integrated Primary School are a fantastic example of integration, providing direction for the future development of integrated education in the area and across Northern Ireland.

Regulation (EU) 2024/1157: Committee Report

Dr Aiken: Last Thursday, the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee considered, and its Alliance Party and Sinn Féin members approved, a report on regulation (EU) 2024/1157 and associated amending regulations.

The regulations refer to waste management in Northern Ireland. In the report are two comments — one from our legal advice and the second from industry — that Members who believe in effective scrutiny should consider. First, paragraph 32 of the report states:

"Having considered its commissioned legal advice, the Committee concluded that the replacement EU act significantly differs, in part, from the content or scope of the EU instrument which it amends or replaces."

Then, in its published response, Recycle NI, the trade association for waste management companies in Northern Ireland, when asked:

"Does it appear likely that the EU act would have a significant impact specific to everyday life ... in Northern Ireland ... ?"

answered yes. Its explanation included the comment:

"this could add significant costs to the treatment of recycled materials generated in Northern Ireland, which would be passed on to ratepayers and could impact on Northern Ireland's ability to meet future recycling targets ... This in turn could attract monetary fines that would impact on ratepayers or taxpayers."

Given those two very real flags that there could be a significant impact on everyday life in Northern Ireland, how do you think the Democratic Scrutiny Committee acted? The report agreed by the Alliance and Sinn Féin members stated that the Committee:

"concluded that it was unable to reach a view on whether the replacement EU act would have a significant impact specific to everyday life of communities in Northern Ireland".

It was "unable to reach" a decision, despite the clear evidence. Furthermore, the Alliance and Sinn Féin members have refused to allow dissenting opinions to be raised in the report, instead saying that, for any contrary views, reference will have to be made to Hansard.

One of the primary roles of the Assembly must be to scrutinise legislation effectively. The renewable heat incentive debacle and the recent decision of the High Court, with its references to ill-thought-out legislation, should have taught us that we can ill afford to ignore real challenges to our constituents when problems have been so clearly highlighted. The Windsor Framework Committee is supposed to act as a dispassionate safeguard against EU regulations interfering significantly with Northern Ireland in comparison with the rest of our nation. If the majority of the Committee members continue on the course that they have clearly set for themselves, it will be clear that that safeguard is not democratic, nor does it provide any scrutiny. We all deserve better.

Animal Cruelty: Ballykelly

Ms Hunter: Over the past few weeks, I have been contacted by hundreds of my constituents in East Derry regarding the vile and horrifying treatment of dogs in the Ballykelly area. The abuse was videotaped, shared online and viewed by thousands. It is so graphic that I cannot detail it in the Chamber.

There is an onus on us in the House, regardless of political party or stance, to reiterate our commitment to protect and preserve the safety, well-being and dignity of animals. A few weeks ago, I stood in exactly this spot and raised the heartbreaking issue of animal cruelty in Northern Ireland, the scale and prevalence of which is, frankly, unbelievable. Our councils have failed to adequately address the issue, and the PSNI continues to fail to prevent it and to adequately hold those responsible to account. We in the Chamber

must take the action that is so desperately needed.

In order to finally make the progress that is so badly needed on this important issue, I call today for the establishment of an animal welfare commissioner and commission to tackle it. We have seen the success of the Scottish National Party initiative in Scotland on the creation of such a unit to provide the clarity of governance needed to properly protect wild and companion animals. The Assembly desperately needs expert guidance, and the welfare of our animals requires such oversight.

For far too long, we have seen disturbing images and videos of depraved people carrying out depraved and cruel acts on innocent and helpless animals. We must now act to put an end to that disgraceful ongoing reality. The establishment of a commission will set the stage for evidence-based policy on the protection of animals and will provide the necessary guidance for legislative and non-legislative routes to foster an environment in which all animals finally get the protection that they rightfully deserve and that my constituents and those of Members across the House deserve to see.

Now is the time for action. Now is the time to establish an animal welfare commission and commissioner. For too long have we witnessed horrific actions of cruelty and violence towards animals. We really can make a change. That is why, today, I will write to the AERA Minister to demand that change urgently.

10.45 am

Ireland's Future

Mr McGuigan: On Saturday, I will join others from all over the island at a major event in the SSE Arena in Belfast organised by Ireland's Future. The event is a significant and important opportunity to engage in the conversation about how we shape the path towards a new Ireland. Ireland's Future is a group established to advocate, promote, debate and have discussions about Ireland's future, particularly focused on the potential that exists for new constitutional arrangements on the island.

I commend Ireland's Future for organising this pivotal event and providing opportunities and spaces for this important conversation to flourish. I encourage all MLAs to read a number of insightful documents published on its website that cover topics as diverse as rights, citizenship and identity; planning for a strong

all-island economy; and the potential for a world-class, all-island national health service. This Saturday's event, entitled "Pathway to Change", will cover those subjects, as well as hosting discussions on the labour movement,; arts and culture; and disability matters in a changing Ireland. There will also be an important discussion focused on perspectives from those in the Protestant community.

The conversation for constitutional change in Ireland is getting louder. It is getting more detailed, and its benefits are becoming increasingly apparent. I encourage everyone with an interest in their future and the future of the people of this island to attend Saturday's event at the SSE Arena in Belfast.

A5 Fatalities

Mr McCrossan: Next month — July — marks 17 years since the Northern Ireland Executive confirmed their acceptance of the A5 western transport corridor proposals to be taken forward: 17 years. In that time, 56 people have died on the A5 road, and thousands have been injured. This week, I have been alerted every day about serious accidents that have occurred on the A5. Luckily, this week, we have had no fatalities, but 56 people have died in that short space of time.

The road is dangerous. It puts our citizen's lives at risk; it does not discriminate. It claims the lives of husbands and wives, sons and daughters, neighbours, friends and people throughout our community. Those people, for the record, were Janeen Black, Colin Thornton, Tony Thompson, John Walker, an unnamed lorry driver in 2007, Leslie Edgar, Mary Elizabeth Scott, Desmond Bingham, Pat McCourt, Shane Caldwell, Zoltan Szabo, Darren McAnenly, Mary Wasson, an unnamed female pedestrian in 2009, Zbigniew Bartnicki, Declan Harvey, Gareth Gallagher, Simon Glenn, Peter Fugill, Cathal Donaghy, Kovacs Szabolcs, Leo McKeever, Alexander McEntee, Patsy McCroary, Kieran McSorley, Michael McDonald, Aaron McDonald, Sean McElwee, Neil McAleer, Shane Rafferty, Caoimhe O'Brien, Maurice McCloughan, Killian Doherty, Margaret McLaughlin, Kathleen McGarvey, Sean Reid, an unnamed male in 2018, an unnamed female in 2018, Darren Gallagher, Aaron Harkin, Nathan Corrigan, Petey McNamee, Peter Finnegan — one of the most horrific accidents on the A5; those three young men lost their lives — Jonathan Reilly, David Gilmore, Sammy Patterson, Niall McDonald, John Rafferty, Julia McSorley, Christine McKane, Dan McKane, an unnamed passenger

in 2023, and, since the House returned in February, Caolan Devlin, Oonagh Burns, Kamile Vaicikonyte and Jamie Moore. Those are the lives lost on that road.

We need the A5 scheme announced and delivered before any further pain is added to the people of our communities. We think on them all and their families.

Lá Domhanda na nAigéan

Mr Sheehan: Rinneadh Lá Domhanda na nAigéan a cheiliúradh Dé Sathairn. Bíonn an lá sin ann gach bliain lena chur i gcuimhne do gach duine an tábhacht a bhaineann leis na haigéin. Is iad na haigéin scamháin an domhain. Tig breis agus 50% den ocsaigin atá againn ó na haigéin. Is iontu fosta atá bunús na bithéagsúlachta ar domhan.

Ach tá na haigéin ag dul i ndrochdhóigh: tá 90% de stoic na n-iasc mór ídithe; tá 50% de sceir coiréil scriosta; agus, achan lá, baintear níos mó as an fharraige ná a thig léi a sholáthar. Níl sin inbhuanaithe. Ach, mar a dúirt eagraithe Lá Domhanda na nAigéan, tá an saol mór bodhar ag éisteacht le figiúirí. Ní leor figiúirí le daoine a ghríosú, agus, mar sin de, ní raibh sna hiarrachtaí a rinneadh go dtí seo leis na haigéin a chosaint ach cneasú thar goimh.

Má tá athrú le teacht ar an scéal, ní mór dúinn múscailt, agus sin an téama a bhí ag Lá Domhanda na nAigéan i mbliana: múscailt go grinneall. Tá na Náisiúin Aontaithe ag iarraidh gluaiseacht saoránach a mhúscailt ar son na n-aigéan. Tá siad ag iarraidh sin a dhéanamh trí lucht déanta beartas, ceannairí dúchais, eolaithe, an earnáil phríobháideach, agus gníomhairí óige a thabhairt le chéile. Caithfidimid uilig go léir ár mana faoi na haigéin a athrú. Caithfidimid teacht ar dhóigheanna leis na haigéin a chosaint agus bainisteoireacht inbhuanaithe a dhéanamh orthu.

Ar an oileán seo againne, tá an tAigéan Atlantach ar an chósta thiar, an Mhuir Cheilteach ar an chósta theas, Muir Éireann ar an chósta thoir, agus Sruth na Maoile ar an chósta thuaidh. Mar sin de, a Cheann Comhairle, tá súil agam go mbeidh muidne anseo in Éirinn in ann ár bpáirt a dhéanamh sa ghluaiseacht ar son na n-aigéan.

World Oceans Day

[Translation: World Oceans Day was celebrated on Saturday. This day is celebrated every year to remind everyone of the importance of our oceans. Oceans are the lungs of the world.]

More than 50% of our oxygen comes from the oceans. They are also where most of the world's biodiversity is to be found.

However, the oceans are in a bad way: 90% of the big fish stocks have been depleted; 50% of coral reefs have been destroyed; and, every day, more is taken from the sea than it can replace. That is not sustainable. However, as the organisers of World Oceans Day said, the world is deaf to figures. Figures are not enough to motivate people, and, for that reason, the efforts made so far to protect the oceans have only skimmed the surface.

If the situation is to change, we must wake up. That was the theme of this year's World Oceans Day: awaken new depths. The United Nations is trying to awaken a citizens' movement for the oceans, and it wants to do that by bringing together policymakers, indigenous leaders, scientists, the private sector and youth activists. All of us need to change our attitude to the oceans; we need to find ways to protect and sustainably manage our oceans.

On this island of ours, we have the Atlantic Ocean on the west coast, the Celtic Sea on the south coast, the Irish Sea on the east coast, and the North Channel on the north coast. Therefore, Mr Speaker, I hope that we here in Ireland will be able to play our part in the movement for the oceans.]

Mr Speaker: That concludes Members' statements.

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Agriculture

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that they should keep their questions concise.

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

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Minister.

Mr Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 regarding the twenty-eighth North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) agriculture meeting, which was held in the NSMC joint secretariat offices, Armagh, on Wednesday 29 May 2024.

Junior Minister Aisling Reilly MLA, junior Minister Pam Cameron MLA and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive at the meeting. The Irish Government were represented by Charlie McConalogue TD, Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and Heather Humphreys TD, Minister for Rural and Community Development. Minister McConalogue chaired the meeting. The statement has been agreed with junior Minister Reilly and junior Minister Cameron, and I make it on behalf of us all.

It was a positive meeting, and a lot of progress was made. I will take each paper in the order in which it was discussed.

On the review of the work programme, the NSMC noted that officials from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) and the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) had concluded a review of the work programme for the NSMC agriculture sector and agreed a revised programme for the sector.

On cooperation on animal health, the Council noted the continuing work and progress achieved on the delivery of the 'All-Island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy Action Plan' since the last NSMC agriculture meeting in November 2020. Ministers welcomed the establishment in 2023 of the all-island surveillance forum. The NSMC acknowledged

the ongoing efforts by officials from both jurisdictions to seek ways to maximise existing cooperation on animal health and welfare, including the joint DAERA/DAFM exercise on contingency planning for swine fever, which was planned for June 2024. Ministers looked forward to the continuation of practical and effective cooperation on animal health and welfare and disease control in both jurisdictions in order that the health and welfare of livestock is maintained at the highest level.

On cooperation on plant health and pesticides, Ministers welcomed the ongoing commitment of DAFM and DAERA to the shared objective of achieving and maintaining good plant health status on the island.

The Council noted the ongoing collaboration and sharing of expertise in training; scientific research; diagnostic capability; risk anticipation; risk management, including contingency planning; and risk communication in plant health. The Council welcomed the intention to conduct a joint DAFM/DAERA simulation exercise in 2024 to test plant health contingency plans. Ministers welcomed the continued sharing of expertise and training between DAFM and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) — there are lots of acronyms in the statement — as the result of DAFM's acting as a national reference laboratory for DAERA and AFBI. Ministers noted the continuing cooperation in the regulation of placing on the market and using pesticides.

The NSMC welcomed the continuing cooperation between both Administrations on farm safety and the ongoing work to improve it. The Council also welcomed the first joint meeting of the farm safety partnerships from both jurisdictions, which took place in February this year.

With regard to cooperation on rural development, the Council welcomed the establishment of the North/South rural policy forum, which provides a mechanism to share information and best practice and to identify opportunities for joint working on issues that impact on rural areas and rural communities. Ministers noted the cooperation between the two jurisdictions on rural development, as well as the strong commitment of both Administrations to share information and best practice on rural development and to enhance cooperation on it.

Ministers acknowledged the good collaboration between DAERA and DAFM in maximising the drawdown of EU funding under Horizon 2020

and Horizon Europe. The Council welcomed the €106.6 million in funding secured by successful applications from both Administrations for projects in the agriculture, forestry, food, marine and bioeconomy sectors under Horizon 2020, as well as the €4.5 million secured to date under Horizon Europe.

Ministers noted the progress made in joint funding bids from both jurisdictions under the DAFM national competitive calls, including €10.8 million by DAFM and £3.8 million by DAERA for 12 projects since 2021. The Council noted that seven projects involving total funding of €7.6 million have been funded over the eight years of the US-Ireland R&D Partnership in agriculture. Ministers welcomed the announcement of a €9 million funding initiative to support the development of the all-island bioeconomy in the agriculture and marine sectors, with co-funding from the Government of Ireland's Shared Island initiative, DAFM and DAERA. The NSMC welcomed the ongoing consideration by DAFM and DAERA of further possibilities for research collaboration under existing or new measures.

There was also a presentation on water quality from an agriculture perspective. Ministers noted the presentation on water quality and the way in which science and innovation are being harnessed to improve water quality from an agricultural perspective.

The Council welcomed the ongoing cooperation between both Administrations on addressing climate change and the loss of biodiversity in the agriculture sector. Ministers agreed that officials from DAFM and DAERA will explore the potential for increasing North/South cooperation on those issues.

The Council agreed to hold its next agriculture meeting in autumn 2024. I welcome the re-establishment of formal NSMC meetings and look forward to working with my counterparts in the South in all areas of cooperation in the agriculture sector. I commend the statement to the Assembly and welcome any questions.

Mr McGlone: Thank you, Minister, for the statement. A lot of areas were covered, and I seek a bit more detail on some of them.

You mentioned cooperation on rural development and on sharing information and best practice. Will there be some mechanism for providing us with more detail on those, aside from today's statement, of course? What are the actualities when it comes to cooperation between both jurisdictions on those matters of mutual interest and concern?

Secondly, you stated that Ministers noted a presentation on water quality and the science and innovation that are being harnessed. Does that include blue-green algae? I know that parts of the rest of the island suffer from that plague in our waterways, although maybe not to the same extent as we do in Lough Neagh. Is there any complementarity in research or scientific work that could be undertaken on an all-island basis?

11.00 am

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. Rural development was discussed at the NSMC, and I also discussed it with one of the junior Ministers on St Patrick's Day in Brussels. There is a real opportunity to take learnings from what the South has done and use those to help shape rural affairs policy in the North. I will want engage with the Committee and relevant stakeholders as we set out our road map on rural development policy. There is lots to learn. We need to develop a policy. I have heard the Committee's concerns about the need to shape rural development policy in Northern Ireland. I want to engage with the Committee and stakeholders on that. It is critical that we do it in a process of co-design.

In Armagh yesterday, we talked about blue-green algae in the environment and the aquaculture and marine sectoral meetings. There is a real desire from the South to work with us on this, taking account of the fact that the catchment area of Lough Neagh incorporates parts of the South. Hopefully, the Executive can agree the Lough Neagh report and action plan, which provides a template for lots more North/South cooperation on this issue, particularly around science and research.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his statement. The statement refers to cooperation on animal health issues across the island. We have a serious issue with bovine TB. We have a rate of 10% in the North, compared with a rate of 5% in the South, and it costs your Department £53 million. Was there any discussion on cooperation on testing and preventative regimes, particularly in border areas?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his important question. Not a day goes past when the issue of TB is not raised with me. The level of infection in our herds is not sustainable for my Department nor for farmers in Northern Ireland, so we need to take action on it. I am meeting the Chief Veterinary Officer this afternoon on possible actions. Hopefully, we will outline

those over the summer. At the Committee last week, I said that I am happy to appear before the Committee over the summer to talk through those. There are opportunities for North/South cooperation, because we have mutual challenges. I am looking forward to engaging with the South on what they have done, and how we can work together to address this issue. This is critical for me. I realise the importance of acting, and I will not be found wanting.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his statement. To add to the Deputy Chair's question, TB is a serious issue. Was it discussed at the meeting yesterday, or was it not? It is important to learn lessons from the situation in the Irish Republic, where levels of TB are much lower than ours.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. The issue of TB featured in the papers for the North/South Ministerial Council that we are talking about. There is a need to do a lot more work, North/South and east-west, because there are also learnings to take from GB. I get the concerns. The difference between now and January of this year is that there are now Ministers in post. I have been working with officials. I tasked my Chief Veterinary Officer on the first day that he started the job to look at the issue afresh. Over the summer, we will bring forward proposals for action. That will involve taking learnings, North/South and east-west. That will be a key feature, and I am keen to do it.

Mr Blair: I will continue on a theme already established and ask the Minister whether he has any plans to increase dedicated cross-border working on animal welfare such as that done previously, as mentioned in the statement, on the African swine fever contingency plan.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. Animal health and welfare, as outlined in the statement, was discussed at the meeting. It is a key area of cooperation, North/South, but a lot more can be done. DAFM in the South is looking at a ban on the importing of dogs with cropped ears and a prohibition on shock collars. I am keen to explore similar measures in Northern Ireland, resources and time permitting. There needs to be North/South cooperation on animal welfare. I am meeting the Chief Veterinary Officer this afternoon about not just TB but animal welfare.

It is important that, on the road ahead, I am able to outline my vision for how we improve protections against animal cruelty in Northern Ireland. I am very clear that that should be a

process of co-design. There are a number of areas where we need to take action. I want to engage with stakeholders to get their views on these issues. I also want to engage with my counterpart in the South to see what they are doing and how we can work together. That engagement will have lots of mutual benefit in planning the road ahead.

I am aware of the calls for an all-Ireland register of animal welfare offenders. I hope to pick that up with my counterpart down South. I am prepared to look at the evidence base on that and, most importantly, engage with stakeholders to see how we can look at the issue alongside everything else. I am not ruling anything out. I will engage with stakeholders, the Chief Veterinary Officer and officials to scope out how we can have the best and highest protections against animal cruelty in Northern Ireland.

Miss Brogan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. *[Translation: I thank the Minister.]* On addressing climate change and loss of biodiversity, it seems sensible to have a joined-up approach to biodiversity loss on our island. What scope is there for a truly integrated approach to the issue through the development of something like an all-Ireland biodiversity strategy?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her question. There is a lot of merit in that. From the discussions that we had yesterday on climate change, the challenges in the North are similar to those in the South. I am quite keen to explore that because, North/South and east-west, we will be much stronger if we work together on this, particularly in investment in science and research.

Mr McMurray: I thank the Minister. In developing a new rural affairs policy, will the opportunity for cross-border cooperation be considered?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question, and the answer is yes. We had discussions on that on St Patrick's Day, and, obviously, as part of the discussions that occurred as part of the NSMC meeting. There is lots of stuff happening in the South that we want to take learning from, but we also want to have a rural development policy that reflects the real issues and challenges of today, particularly the place of women in rural communities and childcare, because those are the issues that are facing society today. I want to do that in a process of co-design, but I will engage with my colleagues, North/South and east-west, to see how best we

can have a policy that meets the needs of people in rural areas of Northern Ireland.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. Did Lough Neagh come up? If so, what discussion took place and what actions came out of it?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her question. Lough Neagh was discussed as part of the meeting, but it was also discussed yesterday as part of our sectoral meetings on the environment, aquaculture and the marine. There is a wide range of opportunities for cooperation, North/South, which will be predicated on the Lough Neagh report and action plan, which, hopefully, will be agreed by the Executive soon. It is imperative that we agree that report and take action. I was updated by officials this morning that, this year, there have been 33 reports of blue-green algae in Northern Ireland at 19 sites, so it is absolutely critical that we take action on that. At the meeting, there was a presentation on water quality and how the North/South issues have been faced. I want to move forward on these issues and take the learning from the South but also explore opportunities for cooperation.

Dealing with the issues associated with Lough Neagh is based on four pillars: education; investment and incentivisation; regulation; and enforcement. There are many areas within those pillars where there is real potential for cross-border cooperation. For example, setting up a science platform and taking the North/South learnings on training and engagement with our farmers. Our farmers are part of the solution here, and lots of stuff has been done down South that we want to take learning from. On catchment areas and one-to-one engagement with farmers, we are doing that in the North and in the South, and we need to take the learning and see how we can do that much better and roll it out further in Northern Ireland.

On incentivisation, we are doing stuff in the North that we can share with the South, such as better management of slurry as part of the small business research initiative (SBRI) and increasing tree planting. On regulation, there are areas such as the nutrients action programme and the third river basin management plan that we are looking at, North and South. Down South, they have set up a fertiliser database, which is something that we want to consider in the North. On enforcement, there are lessons to be learned, North and South, on how we can do that better. Let us be clear: there are opportunities for action, and there is clear plan ahead through the Lough

Neagh report and action plan. I want us to get cracking and be able to give people in Northern Ireland hope that we are turning the situation around, working in partnership in the Assembly and Executive, North/South and east-west.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his statement. With regard to the all-island animal health and welfare strategy, was access to veterinary medicines discussed, given that the end of the grace period is coming and the potential implications for animal health and welfare and, by extension, for farmers from the costs associated with those changes?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. That was not discussed specifically at the meeting, but I am aware of the concerns about it. I will meet another stakeholder group about that matter today. Further to the debate that we had in the Assembly a few weeks ago, I am working with officials on the correspondence that I promised to send to the UK Government on that. That correspondence will be focused on proposed solutions, because solutions are what we need to focus on when it comes to EU exit. It is about being pragmatic and constructive in this place and bringing forward ways in which the UK Government and the EU can bring solutions to aid the resolution of that issue. That is what I intend to set out in the weeks ahead.

Mr McReynolds: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. Can you provide an update on the sustainable production of biomethane?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. I am quite excited about that. It is quite good. I do not think that I would have been so excited about it a number of months ago. It is an opportunity for Northern Ireland to showcase itself. We do ourselves down too much here. We have a problem with slurry here in Northern Ireland, but we have solutions. For that issue, we have the small business research initiative. In phase 1, six local companies developed proposals for that, and we are moving into phase 2. Essentially, rather than looking at something as a problem, the initiative looks at it as an opportunity and a resource. That fits in well with the Lough Neagh report and action plan. We are doing a number of things in Northern Ireland that we need to shout about. As well as that initiative, there is the soil nutrient health scheme and future farm support. There is a positive future ahead for us. I am keen to sell that to people once we launch phase 2 of the initiative, because it allows us to bring solutions to environmental problems and challenges for the farming community.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Some Members indicated that they wanted to come in, but they were not here when the Minister started making his statement, so, regrettably, they will not be called this time. I appreciate that we are running slightly ahead of time.

That concludes questions on the statement. Members may take their ease while we get ready for the next item of business, which will be a motion on the legislative programme.

11.15 am

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Executive Legislation Programme 2024

Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the Executive's legislation programme as presented by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in their statement of 23 May 2024.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours 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.

Mrs O'Neill: On 23 May, the deputy First Minister and I made a written statement to advise the Assembly of the legislation that Ministers on the Executive Committee intend to introduce in the period up until the end of this calendar year, subject to Executive agreement on the content of each Bill. It may be useful for me to begin by setting out for Members the principal considerations that informed the preparation of the programme.

The context in which the programme is being presented differs from that in previous years. The continuity of policy and legislative development that would normally have been maintained between mandates and sessions of the Assembly has undoubtedly been disrupted. With the return to full operation of the institutions in February, Ministers inherited a wide range of issues that may ultimately require the enactment of legislation. In the absence of Ministers, the development of policy across those areas had not been consistent and, in many cases, could not be translated into firm proposals for Bills. For the purposes of the legislative programme that we have presented to the Assembly, the Executive have therefore focused on the proposals that, we believe, can be introduced as Bills in the remainder of 2024. We wish to emphasise, however, that the programme by no means represents the totality of the Executive's legislative ambitions for the mandate.

Work is ongoing in Departments as the policy development process resumes, and we anticipate returning to the Chamber later this year with a further programme setting out the Executive's legislative intentions until the end of the 2024-25 session. The programme will be monitored regularly to assess progress and identify emerging legislation.

I will now turn to the programme itself and briefly set out the purpose of each Bill, as outlined in our statement. Members will be familiar with two of the Minister for Communities' four Bills, as the Defective Premises Bill and the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill were introduced in the Assembly on 20 May and have already passed Second Stage. The Child Support Enforcement Bill is scheduled for introduction on 17 June and will make provision for the enforcement of child support and other maintenance in order to maintain parity with Westminster legislation. To recognise, promote and protect British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL), the Minister for Communities also proposes to introduce a sign language Bill.

The Minister for the Economy will introduce legislation relating to his Department's financial powers, legislation to provide a new function for the Utility Regulator and legislation to make provision for the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scheme. A financial assistance Bill will resolve issues with some of the Department for the Economy's financial powers. A Utility Regulator decarbonisation powers Bill will provide the Utility Regulator with a new function to enable it to support the Department for the Economy in the delivery of the Executive's energy strategy and targets under the Climate Change Act 2022. An RHI scheme Bill will make provision for the future of the scheme.

The Minister of Finance will introduce the normal Budget Bills as part of the annual financial cycle and a financial provisions Bill to reconcile several routine financial matters across Departments. The Minister will also introduce a Fiscal Council Bill to establish the Fiscal Council on a permanent, statutory basis in order to bring greater transparency and independent scrutiny to the current and future state of local public finances.

The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs will focus his legislative plans on dilapidated buildings and altering provisions relating to EU food legacy. A dilapidation Bill will confer functions on councils to provide them with a modern, fit-for-purpose regime to tackle dilapidated and often dangerous buildings and

sites. In addition, the Minister proposes to introduce an agriculture Bill to provide powers to allow the Department to transition from or end the legacy EU fruit and vegetable aid scheme and EU agri-food information and promotion scheme as they apply locally.

The former Minister of Health introduced the first Bill of the mandate — the Hospital Parking Charges Bill — on 15 April. After process by accelerated passage, it received Royal Assent on 16 May. His successor proposes to introduce a further two Bills on the modernisation of public health legislation and adult protection. A public health Bill will replace and widen the scope of the Public Health Act 1967, which is over 50 years old and needs to be updated to make it fit for purpose. The adult protection Bill is a response to the Commissioner for Older People's 'Home Truths' investigation into Dunmurry Manor care home and the certified professional environmental auditor's independent review of safeguarding and care at Dunmurry Manor. It will introduce additional protections to underpin and strengthen the adult protection process and align it with best practice in other jurisdictions.

The Minister of Justice plans to introduce a justice Bill, primarily relating to the retention of fingerprints and DNA profiles and other provisions about child bail, remand and custody.

The Minister for Infrastructure will introduce a water, flooding and sustainable drainage Bill to provide new and additional powers across seven areas of water, flooding and drainage legislation.

Finally, as First and deputy First Minister, we will introduce a Bill on a mother-and-baby homes, Magdalene laundries and workhouses public inquiry and financial redress. Its purpose is to establish a statutory public inquiry to investigate issues of individual, institutional, organisational and state responsibility for human rights violations experienced in mother-and-baby institutions, Magdalene laundries and workhouses between 1922 and 1995. It will further include provision for the Executive Office to establish a redress service to administer financial redress schemes.

On behalf of the Executive Committee, we commend the legislative programme to the Assembly. We hope that Members will engage positively with the Ministers responsible for the Bills as we seek to impact positively in a practical and meaningful way the communities that we have been elected to serve.

Mr O'Toole: I am pleased to debate the legislative programme for 2024, such as it is. We are told by the First Minister that the programme, which was laid on 23 May by written ministerial statement, does not represent the totality of the Executive's ambitions in relation to legislation. All I can say is, "Thank goodness for that", because, when compared with some of the promises that have been contained in motions from Executive parties over the past four and a half months and with the promises that have been made in PR photo opportunities, in videos by Ministers and, indeed, in party manifestos, what is in the legislative programme is, I am afraid, pretty thin gruel. I acknowledge that this is a three-year mandate. Curtailed and constrained by public finances as it is, it is still a significant period in which significant legislative achievements can be met.

Before I make broader comments, I want to go through some of the specifics in the legislative programme. In framing some of my comments, it would be helpful to know, perhaps from the First Minister or the deputy First Minister, whoever is winding up, to understand which of the Bills were in draft form when the Executive were restored in February or, indeed, which of them were in draft form when the Executive collapsed in 2022. Several of the Bills that we are talking about here are Bills that have been talked about for a long time, but there are lots of other Bills that are not on this programme that have also been talked about for a long time.

I commend a couple of the Bills in particular that, I am glad, are coming forward. The Minister for Communities has been commended, deservedly, for working with his colleagues to introduce the Defective Premises Bill in relatively quick time. The sign language Bill, clearly, is important progress for people in that community. There are some welcome tidying-up measures from the Minister for the Economy around the Utility Regulator's powers and the RHI scheme, but they are, as far as I am aware, legislation that has been in the works for a long time. There is nothing particularly that aligns to the Economy Minister's grand vision, much of which I agree with in principle. There are no legislative indications of how any of that will be delivered. There is certainly not the ambitious workers' rights legislation that has been promised by the Economy Minister and his party. Let us bear it in mind that these are simply Bills to be introduced this year. I am sure that few of them will be passed this year. I am glad that the Minister of Finance is introducing a Bill to put the Fiscal Council on a statutory footing. That is

most welcome, and I have been calling for it for some time, as others have.

The Bill from the Health Minister to respond to the findings in relation to Dunmurry Manor is, of course, welcome. There are other measures, including the Minister of Justice's updating of the rules around fingerprints and DNA profiles. I have put on record my disappointment that the Minister of Justice has walked away from her and her party's long-standing commitment to a stand-alone hate crime Bill. I hear sighs from my colleagues on the Alliance Benches, but my job is holding the Executive to account, and I will not be deterred from doing that, no matter what Members from Executive parties think. That is what the Opposition are here for, and we will do that job.

Under the previous item of business, we had a discussion about the North/South Ministerial Council agriculture meeting, and you, Mr Speaker, are from an agricultural background. There is a saying in agricultural circles in Texas that certain farmers can be all hat and no cattle. Well, I would say that, looking at some of what has come out of the Executive over the past four or five months, the public of Northern Ireland might well conclude that, so far, the Executive is all hat and no cattle. We have had dozens upon dozens of motions promising everything from action on Lough Neagh to support for childcare — I admit that there has been some spending on childcare from the Education Minister, which I commend — and a range of other things. Indeed, this morning, the First Minister was saying that Sinn Féin is bringing forward a motion to support uniform costs. That is enormously welcome and urgent, but, so far as I understand, that will come via a private Member's Bill; it is not even in the Executive legislative programme.

All of those motions laid out vital aspirations with which we do not disagree. When will they be implemented? When will we see an actual Programme for Government? It is nearly 130 days into the mandate, after hundreds of meetings between civil servants and Executive parties between 2022 and 2024, and we still do not have that signed off.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: Although we will not force it to a Division, we will not support the legislative programme.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: It is all hat and no cattle. It is time for delivery.

Ms Bradshaw: Although I am Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office, I speak in my capacity as an Alliance MLA. In that capacity, I endorse the legislative programme and will provide my party's initial response.

I trust that what is before us will indeed be what is delivered. Since the First Minister and deputy First Minister are presenting it as their programme, there must be no excuse for any delay in bringing forward the Bills contained in it across all Departments, including those that may usefully be introduced before the summer.

In the Executive Office, the introduction of legislation to set up a public inquiry and redress scheme for the victims and survivors of mother-and-baby institutions, Magdalene laundries and workhouses is, of course, welcome; indeed, it is long overdue. The inquiry will, it is stated, address human rights violations, and it is correct that it should do that. However, as with what we refer to as historical institutional abuse, we should call this out for what it really was: child abuse.

I note also that the statement uses the term "mother-and-baby homes" with reference to the planned Bill but that, later in the statement, the reference is to "mother-and-baby institutions". I urge them to use the term "institutions" in the legislation, as, I am afraid, there was nothing homely about those places.

With regard to Justice, the statement refers to a justice Bill, a modernisation Bill arising from the justice (miscellaneous provisions) Bill agreed to by the Executive back in 2020. Given the timescale, it is essential that that Bill be brought forward before the summer, and I trust that the First Minister and deputy First Minister will be able to confirm later in the debate whether that will be the case.

In Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs we have two important Bills: the dilapidation Bill, which aims to confer functions on councils to tackle dilapidated buildings and sites, and the agriculture Bill on the continuation of EU legacy funding. Those are important modernisation bills that are most obviously of significance to rural communities.

In Health, we have concerns about the adult protection Bill, even though we fully accept its intent. We do not believe that mandatory CCTV is legally competent, and we fear delays in the subsequent regulations. We trust that the new Minister can address those concerns as a

priority as a step in restoring families' confidence. It is important legislation, and we want to make sure that it works. We also recognise the need to update our public health legislation but will reserve our position until we see what is in the Bill. I acknowledge, however, that the Health Minister provided some clarity on that at Question Time yesterday.

11.30 am

In Economy and Finance, we have the financial assistance Bill, on which the Department for the Economy is consulting but which, I understand, will probably transfer to the Department of Finance. The Bill seeks to clarify the Department's powers to provide financial assistance in the interests of the economy, to form companies, to exempt or remit certain fees relevant to Tourism NI, and to make other amendments, including to departmental accounting. We welcome those steps while reserving our position on the final Bill, depending on the detail that will follow the consultation.

In Economy, the Utility Regulator decarbonisation powers Bill will be the subject of an Alliance motion later today, so little more needs to be said here. We feel, however, that it falls short of extending the regulator's powers to cover oil, which my Alliance Party colleagues and I regard as a wasted opportunity. It is also concerning that we do not yet appear to have had Executive agreement on an RHI scheme Bill, despite its appearance in the statement.

In Finance, we support the Fiscal Council Bill to put the Fiscal Council on a statutory footing, but we would like its remit to include a specific requirement on assessing the costs of division. We recognise that this is a busy legislative period for the Department, with various Budget Bills and other legislation, such as on no-fault divorces, planned for later in the mandate.

Ms Nicholl: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bradshaw: Yes.

Ms Nicholl: Does the Member agree that it is important to introduce as many Bills as possible before the summer in order to allow time for consultation and to be ready for scrutiny by Committees in the autumn?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you. I agree with the Member. It would be a wasted opportunity if we did not get as many Bills out to consultation as

possible over the summer. I thank the Member for her comment.

In Communities, we saw regulations yesterday on the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill and the child support enforcement Bill. They align with the rest of the UK and should lead to notable efficiencies of clear benefit to the population as a whole, so, of course, we support them. Personally, I warmly welcome the inclusion in the statement of a sign language Bill, although I hoped that it would have already been introduced during the mandate. My own view, which is well rehearsed, is that the Bill's contents should have been included the package of language and identity legislation passed in 2022, arising, at least in part, from the negotiations between parties after the institutions collapsed in 2017.

In Infrastructure, we welcome the water, flooding and sustainable drainage Bill, with the seven elements now contained in it, including expanded hosepipe bans. We will check the details as the Bill progresses, as it is important to avoid any unintended consequences. Two elements have been omitted from the Bill, on powers of entry and compensation to landowners for alleviating flood risk.

The legislative programme is a good start, but, of course, it needs to be accompanied by a Programme for Government. I recognise the difficulty that the calling of the UK election has caused, as noted by the deputy First Minister yesterday during Question Time, but we will need to see a Programme for Government urgently afterwards —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Bradshaw: — to give greater purpose to this set of Bills.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as ucht an rúin ar maidin. *[Translation: I thank the First Minister for moving the motion this morning.]* I want to be clear: the leader of the Opposition will force a Division, which means opposing sign language.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, I will not, Matthew. Thank you.

It means opposing sign language and opposing protections for some of the most vulnerable adults through the regulation and protection of safeguarding.

Mr O'Toole: We are not forcing a Division, Carál. You are misquoting me.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sorry?

Mr O'Toole: I said that we are not forcing a Division.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ní Chuilín: OK, you will not force a Division — thanks for that clarity — but you are going to vote against the motion *[Interruption.]* You are going to vote against a public inquiry into mother-and-baby institutions and Magdalene laundries. You are also opposing fiscal transparency through putting the Fiscal Council on a statutory footing. It is important to make that clear. As we would say in the New Lodge rather than Texas, that is all fluff and no stuff. We will move on.

I welcome the Executive's programme of legislation for this year. It will probably be a minimum. It is an ambitious programme of legislative work, given that many of the issues have been around for some time. It is a demonstration of the Executive moving forward, and that is to be welcomed. Notwithstanding the challenges and the work that is ongoing to ensure that the British Government provide funding that meets our objective need, it is good that, at least, there is some funding to underwrite the legislative programme. I hope, as I am sure will others, that the Executive will progress the Programme for Government very soon.

It is clear from what the First Minister said that the Executive's legislative programme is the result of the advanced stages of work on policies from the Department. Paula, the Chair of TEO Committee, outlined some of the issues around scrutiny for TEO. I am sure that members of other Committees will do likewise. It is also important that the programme will not be just the final piece of the legislation. I am encouraged to hear that other legislation will perhaps be brought forward, followed by a statement by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

I welcome in particular, as I said, the introduction of legislation on the Fiscal Council, because it needs to be put on a statutory footing. Although I do not sit on the Finance Committee, in my opinion, that will ensure greater independent transparency and scrutiny. That is important work for our Finance Minister.

I am delighted to see the sign language Bill. I have been working on that matter for a long time. It should have been brought forward before. I do not agree with the format that you outlined, Paula, but it will be welcomed, particularly by the deaf and hearing-impaired community, because, effectively, without putting it on a statutory footing, unintended consequences and discrimination will continue.

I also welcome the adult protection Bill. It is very important, as the First Minister said, in the aftermath of the review of Dunmurry Manor care home. That all must be done using a human-rights approach. At the core of the legislation, every process must be implemented to uphold the dignity and rights of some of those who are the most vulnerable. I have looked at the legislation that the Health Minister will introduce, and I would like to see an individual duty of candour in Health and Social Care, particularly given the hyponatraemia and neurology scandals.

When it comes to mother-and-baby institutions, Magdalene laundries and the need for a public inquiry and everything that we have heard, I want to see an acknowledgement that, while financial redress is important, it is about not only acknowledgement but inclusion. We have listened to the members of the consultative forum and learned that they are not happy with the officials' approach. I want to see a greater level of inclusion as part of that and, indeed, other legislation.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I welcome the legislative programme. It is good progress, but there is still much work to be done. I look forward to seeing what private Members' Bills are brought forward. *Tacaím leis an rún. [Translation: I support the motion.]*

Mrs Erskine (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Committee for Infrastructure. As the First Minister outlined, the Executive's legislative programme for 2024 includes one Bill for the Department for Infrastructure, and that is the water, flooding and sustainable drainage Bill. That is the first of five potential Bills that the Department identified, and the Committee understands that there will be at least three Bills in the current mandate. The water, flooding and sustainable drainage Bill will expand the range of activities that are to be included in a hosepipe ban; provide enabling powers for guidance on sustainable drainage systems

(SuDS); enable the adoption of pre-1973 private drainage infrastructure; include powers for Northern Ireland Water to fix missed connections and register adoption agreements in statutory charges registers; put the homeowner flood protection grant on a statutory footing; and make technical amendments to existing legislation.

The Committee received oral evidence from departmental officials on the outcome of the Department's consultation and from NI Water, as the Bill will make amendments to its powers and duties. Although the draft Budget allocations had not been announced before the evidence sessions took place, the Committee was fully aware of the overall constrained financial position that the Executive faced. Departmental officials were therefore questioned on what cost or savings analysis of the Bill's provisions had been undertaken. However, they were unable to provide details of potential costs or savings. They explained that the Bill will provide for enabling powers, with the details subsequently being worked out in subordinate legislation.

In advance of its evidence session, Northern Ireland Water provided the Committee with its response to the Department's consultation, which was dated June 2022. In its covering letter to the Department, Northern Ireland Water stated that it would need clarity on the funding and cost implications of the proposal. During the oral evidence session, almost two years later, NI Water said that it had still not had clarity or detailed discussions, yet the proposed extended or new powers appear to have cost implications for it. Members will know the funding issues faced by Northern Ireland Water and the impact that underinvestment has had, particularly on waste water infrastructure. I expect the potential financial implications of the Bill to be of particular interest when the Committee undertakes its detailed scrutiny at Committee Stage.

Other areas explored during the evidence session with departmental officials were the policy proposals relating to SuDS and the homeowner flood protection grant scheme. While the Bill will provide enabling powers for the SuDS guidance, the detail will be brought forward in secondary legislation. It appears that quite a bit of secondary legislation will follow from the Bill. The Committee will want to consider whether the use of delegated powers is appropriate or the provisions should be included in primary legislation. Where delegated legislation is appropriate, we will want to ensure that it is afforded the proper level of Assembly control.

In closing my comments made with my Infrastructure Committee hat on, the Committee understands that the Bill is not expected to be large in the number of clauses that it will contain. Nonetheless, it will include important provisions, and the Committee will want to take time to consider them in detail when the Bill is introduced later this year.

As a DUP MLA, I will briefly touch on some aspects of the Bill. Through the Committee, I have become aware of legislation that is not fit for purpose, such as that which relates to our taxi industry. It is important that the Department takes that seriously, such are the consequences for home-to-school transport and, indeed, our night-time economy. Furthermore, there must be implementation of the planning reviews and strategies born from Northern Ireland Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee reports. Planning issues have a knock-on impact on our ability to grow our economy and could have a detrimental impact on our ability to reach the climate change targets that are already set out in legislation.

As I have said in the Chamber, infrastructure is the bedrock of our society. It is therefore important that legislation and finance match it to make Northern Ireland better.

Mr Kingston: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Erskine: Yes.

Mr Kingston: Does the Member agree that the legislation is urgently required and that all parties should cooperate to ensure that progress is made at the earliest opportunity?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs Erskine: Absolutely. I thank the Member for his intervention. It is vital to growing our economy and making Northern Ireland better. I therefore endorse the legislative programme, and I look forward to working on it with all colleagues.

Mr Speaker: I call Dr Steve Aiken.

Dr Aiken: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am willing to accept an intervention right now from our friends in the SDLP in order to clarify the question of what was actually said and whether the SDLP will vote for the motion.

Mr O'Toole: I am happy to intervene. I did not realise that that was how interventions worked.

As I pointed out, we said that we will not force a Division. That does not mean that we endorse the legislative programme. We do not have to force a Division in order to indicate that we do not endorse or support it. We think that that support should be fulsome. As I said, much of the legislation is very welcome, and we will support it. I am grateful to have been offered the opportunity to intervene.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

11.45 am

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much, indeed.

I just wanted to get some clarity as we go forward with the debate. Some people may think that the Ulster Unionist Party is also heading in that direction, but I can assure you that we endorse the legislative programme.

Deputy First Minister, in your summing up, will you clarify the issue with a Programme for Government? Many people in Northern Ireland will be concerned by, what seems to be, a fairly light legislative programme. Comments have been made on several occasions that that is due to a Programme for Government not being able to go forward because of what is going on in Westminster. Many people have pointed out that the Assembly has been back for well over 100 days. Maybe there will be a degree of clarification on that.

Our party particularly welcomes the legislation concerning the Utility Regulator. Many Members will know that there are many concerns out there about how the Northern Ireland energy market works — or, indeed, does not work. Giving more powers to the Utility Regulator will be vital to supporting and improving that.

I join with my friend across the Floor in welcoming the Fiscal Council Bill. That is a much-needed piece of legislation, and putting the Fiscal Council on a statutory footing should be progressed and welcomed by all.

I notice that some things are not in the legislative programme. Indeed, my party is particularly interested in looking at the future status of Northern Ireland Water and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, because they are vital for building social housing and making sure we have water and waste water infrastructure that is capable of doing what we need it to do.

We also need to be aware of some previous issues with ill-thought-out legislation coming before the House and being pushed through. I refer in particular to issues with legislation related to the justice sector and RHI. Such legislation needs to be scrutinised effectively and properly, and we cannot be in a position where our judicial process is questioning the validity of some of the legislation that the Northern Ireland Assembly has passed. That is a substantive issue, and it is something that we, as Members, need to be cognisant of to ensure that we are capable of carrying out our roles. Effective scrutiny is vital, and we need to be able to manage that effectively.

There are other Bills, but, again, the question needs to be about how quickly we can start the process. Again, I put it to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that the people of Northern Ireland want to see a Programme for Government. We need to get moving. To be quite honest with you, from being out there, knocking on doors and getting ready for the Westminster election, people do not understand why we are delaying. Will you address those issues in your comments?

For any legislation that comes through the Assembly, we must look at it appropriately, give it the due diligence and scrutiny that it requires and look at it dispassionately across the Chamber to make sure that we provide good legislation that works for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Kingston: I welcome the publication of the programme of legislation, which the Executive intend to bring forward during the remaining six months of 2024. Let us be mindful of the timescale: it is not a full year's programme and is for the remaining six months of the year. As has been stated, the programme does not represent the totality of Ministers' intentions, but it is a clear commitment from each Minister to legislation that they will progress during the remainder of the year.

The programme responds to real needs in our society and the need to catch up with relevant legislation in the rest of the United Kingdom. As a member of the Committee for Communities, I welcome the undertaking by the Minister to bring forward four Bills. The first is the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill, which was introduced last month and encourages employees, particularly young people, to take up the opportunity for automatic enrolment in pension schemes, where they will receive an employer's contribution. That will lower the minimum age and minimum salary level so that more young people have the opportunity to be

automatically enrolled onto pension schemes and receive the employer's contribution. The second is the child support enforcement Bill. This will address lengthy court times, which are typically 22 weeks in Northern Ireland. In the rest of the UK, however, they have been reduced to typically six weeks. That will be welcomed by all, ensuring that payments are received by parents with responsibility. Thirdly, Members will be aware of the Minister for Communities' very timely and responsible actions in taking responsibility for defective premises. He is addressing an issue that was highlighted in the news by bringing forward legislation that, again, establishes parity with arrangements elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The periods of liability will be 30 years retrospectively and 15 years prospectively. With the approval of the full Executive, the Minister agreed to bring that forward under accelerated passage. The full Executive supported that. There was a matter on which there was confusion over where responsibility lay, but the Minister for Communities stepped forward. There will also be a sign language Bill to ensure access to British Sign Language and Irish Sign language.

Briefly, as a member of the Committee for the Executive Office, I welcome the commitment to introduce a Bill relating to mother-and-baby institutions, Magdalene laundries and workhouses between 1922 and 1995. There is a commitment to a public inquiry to investigate the range of responsibilities and establish further redress services. The Committee received delegations from a range of relevant agencies. What we heard was, at times, quite poignant and, indeed, harrowing. We heard from various groups representing victims and survivors, from the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse and from departmental officials. For all concerned, this has been a long campaign for recognition, accountability and redress. It is important that victims and survivors, who have been waiting for many years, see completion on this matter during their lifetime, as many are at an advanced age.

As a member of those two Committees, I welcome the commitments made by the Ministers to progress those matters.

Ms Egan: I will speak in favour of the motion on the legislative programme for 2024. While I may have some concerns on combined outstanding commitments, I see this as a noteworthy step forward in our politics and, in this mandate, an opportunity to further the rights and experiences of people across Northern Ireland.

When we take a step back and read the document in the whole, it gives us some hope, not necessarily in its legislative proposals alone but in the idea of a moving, functioning Government seeking to deliver change for people in Northern Ireland. A few months ago, we did not have that. I will evaluate the legislative plan — I urge others to do the same — by how it ensures the success of our individuals and communities, adds to their lives and helps them to gain the justice that they seek.

The cross-departmental picture that is presented is largely welcome. Looking to the Department of Justice, I am excited by the contribution of the Justice Minister, Naomi Long, who will not just extend the rights of children to an international standard but will retract and rewrite the archaic and out-of-date laws that do not represent modern society.

The Finance Minister's Fiscal Council Bill will establish the Fiscal Council on a permanent, statutory basis, which will create more transparency on what comes out of the public pocket and how we grow our accounts to better our public services. I welcome that, but, as my colleague Paula Bradshaw touched on, we could expand the Fiscal Council's remit to include assessment of the costs of division.

A sign language Bill is to be brought forward by the Minister for Communities. The deaf and hard-of-hearing community have been asking the House to take leadership on that for many years. I hope that the Bill will look to our building an increasingly accessible and inclusive society.

I am also glad to see the legislative plans of the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, particularly the dilapidation Bill, which aims to confer on councils further functions to tackle dilapidated buildings and sites. We see the need across Northern Ireland for such a Bill, but I am acutely aware of the need for it in my constituency of North Down.

We also really welcome the Bill that will be introduced on a mother-and-baby homes, Magdalene laundries and workhouses public inquiry and financial redress scheme. As my colleague highlighted, we have heard extensive testimony from victims and survivors. That work is not just welcome but long overdue. Justice and answers must be given. We need a public inquiry and financial redress.

Taken together, the Bills will enhance the experiences of our people through different legislative avenues. I urge every Department to

continue to have meaningful engagement with stakeholders and our communities on the ground to ensure that the expectations of those who live with the realities that the Bills seek to address are met.

Although I welcome the efforts being made, it would be remiss of me not to recognise the context in which we have received the legislative programme. How can we impactfully assess a legislative programme without having an outcomes-based Programme for Government? How can we approve actions for change without knowing the desired outcomes? I say this sensitively: there are also many outstanding commitments on the table to ensure that we progress as a society. Positive steps and recommendations have already been agreed to in the New Decade, New Approach agreement and other agreements. Those agreements were negotiated to improve the lives of people in Northern Ireland. Whether it be delivering an anti-poverty strategy, reform of the Civil Service, a bill of rights or action in many other areas, we cannot let those commitments fall by the wayside. There are already commitments in place to make changes that will have a positive impact on the lives of those who live here. The lack of delivery on those promises dilutes the hope and goodwill that people have for us to get the job done, and I include in that the legislation on the table today. That is not to diminish the ambition of our legislative programme. I welcome some of its commitments, especially the public inquiry into mother-and-baby institutions. As my colleagues and I have said in the Chamber, the programme marks a positive and welcome step in this mandate for delivery for the people of Northern Ireland. The fact, however, that it is not aligned with a Programme for Government is a lost opportunity.

Mr Frew: I welcome the legislative programme from the Executive, but I sound a warning that having a programme is all well and good, but it should never be about quantity. Rather, it should always be about quality. There are examples from the previous mandate that should warn us all. The Department of Justice and its Minister are in a sorry mess because of legislation that the Minister of Justice passed in the House. In addition, the Department of Health was in the High Court on 29 May 2024 on account of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations 2020, particularly regulation 7(1). It has been attested that the PSNI did not have the power to enter premises to issue fixed penalty notices, which means that most of those fixed penalty notices are now unsafe. It is therefore really important that the Ministers in the Executive

and the MLAs in the Assembly ensure that there is full scrutiny of all legislation that comes before the House.

When I look down the programme, I get all excited, because I see opportunities for me to table amendments to legislation to effect change in a positive way. I therefore welcome the programme, but there are Bills missing from it. It was interesting yesterday when the Sinn Féin Member Pat Sheehan asked the Minister of Health about introducing an individual duty of candour. The waffle that we got from the Minister, who talked about black boxes in aeroplanes, was astounding. That, however, typifies the Department of Health on the issue: it intends to consult it to death. It has no intention of introducing an individual duty of candour.

12.00 noon

Let me remind the House: the report on hyponatraemia-related deaths was published in January 2018, following an inquiry into the deaths of five children in hospitals in Northern Ireland. Five children. The report concluded that the deaths were avoidable and that the culture of the Health and Social Care service and arrangements in place to ensure the quality of services and behaviour of individuals had contributed to their deaths. Justice O'Hara was appointed chair of that review and made 96 recommendations for HSC improvement, among which were the enactment of an organisational duty of candour and an individual duty of candour with criminal sanction for breach.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. This is something that I am passionate about. The Member and I will disagree on a number of issues, but we certainly agree in and around health and moving forward on a duty of candour. However, does the Member agree that politicians, when they are not here — they were not here for five years out of seven — have not played their part in any change and improvement to people's lives, whether in health or education, and that there is a responsibility on all of us to ensure that that does not happen again?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his contribution, but that does not cut it. It simply does not cut it because there is no intent and has been no intent by the Department of Health, no intent by the previous Health Minister and absolutely no intent with the new

Health Minister to bring in an individual duty of candour with criminal sanction for breach. That is astounding, and I wish to pursue that.

Pat Sheehan, who is not in his place, raised this yesterday, which alerted me to the fact that Sinn Féin must be in a position to support this. I give this guarantee and make this commitment: I will put my name to any amendment that brings in an individual duty of candour. I will work with any Member to effect change to make sure that the Roberts family get the justice and acknowledgement that they deserve, along with the blood transfusion scandal people and the Muckamore Abbey Hospital victims, and to stop the gaslighting and isolation of the vaccine-damaged and bereaved community, because they also deserve acknowledgement with regard to an individual duty of candour with criminal sanctions for breach.

It is not the fact that someone makes a mistake or even that there was wrongdoing. It is the fact that it is covered up — systematically covered up — by a Department, trusts and a health service that deem it necessary to do so. That is tremendously sad, and I will fight and put every effort I can into seeing that duty of candour in this place.

Mrs Dodds: Like many others here this morning, I welcome the legislative programme. People across Northern Ireland will be glad to see the work that the Assembly is doing and will recognise that this is, potentially, a first start at getting the Assembly moving on issues that really matter.

I particularly welcome the Health Minister's intention to introduce a public health Bill. As was noted in the statement, the current public health legislation dates from the 1960s. We do not have to look too far back to understand how inadequate that was in dealing with an unprecedented pandemic. We need to see a public health Bill that addresses some of those issues. There has been discussion about the public health Bill in the Health Committee, although we have not seen any drafts or been given any detailed information. I guarantee that we will scrutinise that Bill, because we want to ensure that its powers are appropriate and are organised appropriately.

There is a bit of concern around the timescale for the public health Bill. The previous Minister, Minister Swann, indicated that we would see the public health Bill in June: we have no indication from the current Minister whether that will be the case. It will be fairly complex legislation that will have to go through consultation etc, and, if we are to make moves

in relation to the public health Bill, we need to see it fairly quickly.

I welcome the adult safeguarding Bill. It has always been the DUP position that we need a legislative approach to protection and safeguarding that prioritises the prevention of harm and affords disabled persons the dignity that they deserve. Again, I have a word of warning about the timescale. The adult safeguarding Bill has grown out of the Commissioner for Older People's investigation into Dunmurry Manor. The consultation on that dates back to 2020, and, therefore, we need to get a move on to make sure that the adult safeguarding Bill sees the light of day and that we are able to scrutinise it appropriately.

I will reinforce what my colleague said about the duty of candour. I was pretty appalled yesterday to listen to the Health Minister go on about everything and anything except a duty of candour. It arises out of the really sad circumstances of the deaths of young children in Northern Ireland, and there is a duty on the Health Minister to start to seriously look at it in a legislative way. It is not something that we on these Benches will give up on.

Those individual pieces of legislation are, however, just part of a wider, very complex picture for the Department of Health. The Department of Health has told us a lot about what it cannot do, but it needs to start to tell us what it can do with its substantial budget. It needs to tell us how it will prioritise waiting lists. It needs to tell us how it will prioritise the cancer strategy and red-flag patients who cannot get appointments.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dodds: No, I want to finish. The Department of Health needs to tell us how it will make progress on the stroke strategy and address the crisis in children and young people's services.

In April, I asked the previous Minister of Health when he would bring forward his plan for the reorganisation of the health service. He told me on 15 April that he would do it in a couple of weeks. Obviously, he has left office, and I have invited the current Health Minister to bring forward that plan, but —

Mr Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mrs Dodds: — we will not see an improvement in Health unless we see reorganisation, and we currently have no plan —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs Dodds: — to scrutinise. We need to see the plan.

Ms McLaughlin: I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Executive's legislative programme. It is good that, after almost 130 days, we finally have a bit more clarity on what exactly the Executive intend to do in the remaining time in the session.

There is a lot in the programme that I welcome and would like to see progressed as quickly and as judiciously as possible, and I further clarify that the leader of the Opposition has clearly stated that the SDLP will not force a Division. We are, however, rightly critiquing the level of ambition. As the official Opposition, we have repeatedly pressed the case for delivery, and it is right that greater transparency is welcomed, even in the absence of a Programme for Government. After all, stop-start government has repeatedly prevented legislation here, and certain Bills have been delayed by dysfunction in this place. For example, the First Minister and deputy First Minister's Bill on a mother-and-baby institutions, Magdalene laundries and workhouses public inquiry and financial redress scheme cannot come soon enough; indeed, for many victims, it is already far too late. The Executive Office should proceed with haste with its introduction, conscious of the years of justice delayed and denied to those victims by the decisions of the parties of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to collapse this place again and again in recent years.

It is also welcome to see that the Justice Minister has committed to legislating on a range of issues, notwithstanding the long list of issues that remain unresolved, from the necessary ban on good character references to stand-alone hate crime legislation.

As SDLP economy spokesperson, I welcome the Bill that will adapt the functions of the Utility Regulator and look forward to the House's scrutiny of it. As we will debate later this afternoon, energy costs are out of control. That is thanks in no small part to the Government's failure to properly regulate the sector by giving the Utility Regulator the power to advise Departments, as well as the power to regulate home heating oil, something that, I hope, the Minister will consider including in the Bill.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: Sorry. I have literally five minutes in which to speak.

We need to tell the truth about the programme in front of us, including its shortcomings and omissions. It lacks ambition. Over months now, we have debated issue after issue, many of which related to legislation. Now, we know that the Executive parties met 100 times in advance of the return to the Assembly. In that context, I am surprised that the programme is so light in substance and that so many important issues are missing.

The Minister of Education has said that he is looking at legislation involving a price cap on school uniforms, but that is nowhere to be seen. Families are looking down the barrel of another summer of forking out absurd sums of money to send their children to school. The party of the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs promised an environmental Bill to create an independent environmental protection agency, but, in the middle of the biggest ecological disaster in living memory, we still do not see that coming through on the books. The Minister for the Economy has talked about legislating for the rights of unpaid carers, but, as we speak, tens of thousands of carers are still forced to choose between pursuing their career or caring for their relative. On each of those issues and many more the programme shows that people will be left waiting for another year at least.

I also want to address the issue of regional balance in the programme or the lack thereof. Members might think that I am a broken record on that topic — truth be told, I wish that I did not have to be — but nowhere in the legislative programme can I see a commitment to legislation on regional balance or any indication of how that body of work will level the playing field between different places. There are many objectives in this place. We all believe in causes that hold a special place in our politics, but surely we have some common ground in ensuring that everyone, regardless of postcode, has the opportunity to go as far as their talents will take them. The Economy Minister is aware that I am convinced that only legislation will address the issue of regional imbalance in a long-term and sustainable fashion.

I understand that it represents only the beginning of the Executive's legislative programme, but I think that the public will be underwhelmed by the lack of urgency that the Executive parties are collectively displaying and the slow pace of change in our politics. The public deserve speedy action on the issues that they care about a lot —.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms McLaughlin: Sorry.

Mr McGrath: I rise as a Member from the Opposition to do what the Opposition do: provide scrutiny of the legislation and statements that are presented to the House. That is what the Opposition do here. I am pretty sure that it is what the Opposition do 100 miles down the road. That is our task. I certainly will not be taken to task for providing that scrutiny.

I welcome that, at least, the legislative programme is being offered. However, I agree with my colleagues: there is not much in it. It deals mostly with the mundane and things that, Departments say, have to be done, rather than being strategic or planned or offering something for the future. It simply deals with a lot of things that, Departments have said, need to see some movement after seven years when there was not much government here.

With regard to the health portfolio that I carry for my party, I am looking at things such as the public health Bill. It has been suggested that it will replace legislation that has been there for over 50 years.

It is out of desperation that we need some of the changes and that is why that Bill is coming forward. If we look back at the COVID period and how a lot of those regulations came in and at the difficulties that there were, we will see that the Department is saying that it needs the new legislation in order to be able to deal with things in a better way for the future.

12.15 pm

Again, the adult protection Bill is there as a response to some current issues, but some, especially those that are to do with Dunmurry, showed how out of touch the legislation was as it was not able to deal with any of the issues that were being presented. That is why there was an urgency about updating those matters. Again, however, that is being done out of desperation. When problems arise, we have to rush and get some sort of legislation to try to cover the cracks that have been exposed. That is not planned or strategic, and it does not present a better future for people. It is about doing the barest minimum that we absolutely have to do because of what has taken place.

Things like the adult protection Bill expose how we operate in silos here. One arm of the Executive — the Health Department — is going to propose the Bill, which will include a requirement for the recruitment of a huge number of new social workers. However, there

is no money from the Finance Department to go to the Health Department to deliver the new staff who are required. I have no doubt that we will pass the Bill, but then there will be a crisis, because we will not have the staff, as the money will not be there. That is what happens whenever we deal in silos.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: Yes. I would like the extra minute. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Aiken: Well, we are all here to be supportive. The Member will be aware, of course, that because the Health budget has been cut by 2·3%, it will be increasingly difficult for any Health Minister to be able to deliver what is required. Indeed, many Members throughout the House will agree that cutting the Health budget by 2·3% is not what we should be doing, particularly given the approaching crisis.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McGrath: Thank you. It should be an extra minute and a half, because he covered the next 30 seconds of my remarks, which deal with the fact that the available budget will not even be able to do what is currently expected of the Department of Health and that the Department, when the Bill is passed, will not have the money from the Finance Department or the Executive to be able to deliver what is needed.

There is not one MLA in this room who has not heard, time and time again, that our health service needs to be transformed. We urgently need transformation in order to make our health service fit for the future. Is that in this year's legislative programme? No. All that we will be left with, then, is two years to pass some legislation to deal with transformation. I do not believe that that will happen. Alternatively, as has been mentioned, we will end up with such a short period of time to deal with an issue such as transformation that we will probably mess it up, because it will be rammed through with not enough time for scrutiny or interrogation of the Bill to make sure that it will be done properly.

That brings me to the next piece of legislation, which is to do with hospital car parking charges. Only this Executive could pass a Bill about cars that involves a U-turn. They overturned their own decision that they took only two years previously. They rammed it through in the time before an election when there was not the proper time for scrutiny.

I believe that the legislative programme will deliver some work but not enough. We must have more ambition for this place in order to be able to deliver much, much more.

Mr Speaker: I call the deputy First Minister, who has 10 minutes to make her winding-up speech.

Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First Minister): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank Members for their contributions. This has been a wide-ranging debate that has touched on many of the key issues that the House has already discussed through a number of motions and debates. All those issues are, of course, important.

Passing legislation is the primary function of the Assembly. That is why we were determined to make our written statement and to move the motion, which sets out the Executive's immediate programme of primary legislation work. It was encouraging to hear from so many Members, and I want to touch on a number of points that were made in the debate.

The leader of the Opposition, Matthew O'Toole, described the programme as "thin gruel". I assure the Member that — he mentioned it in his remarks — this is the programme for the remainder of 2024. There are six months left, including the summer period. Of course, we have to be realistic. It is a primary duty of elected Members and, indeed, Ministers in this Government to ensure that we are honest with the public about what is realistic in what we can do. He accused us of being all hat and no cattle. I do like a hat, but, having attended some fantastic country shows over the past number of weeks, I like my cattle as well. On the serious point, the First Minister and I have discussed this issue in some detail. We find it incredibly important for us to get out there to support communities and to support events, but we recognise that absolutely key to this Administration will be delivery. It will be the cattle, and that is what we are working hard on. Of course, it is also key that what we focus on is deliverable. If we try to prioritise everything, nothing will be done. That is what we are working on in the Programme for Government and within the Executive Office. I can assure him that this is just the start of our ambition, and we are deeply ambitious for this place. We have a shared determination to build a better and brighter place, and that must include addressing the problems, growing our economy and, of course, the important work of the transformation of our public services.

The Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office, Paula Bradshaw, is not in her place. I welcome her endorsement of the programme. She raised a number of key aspects. She welcomed, as others, including Carál Ní Chuilín, did, the sign language Bill. I welcome that deeply. It is a very good indication and sign of our inclusive agenda to ensure that everybody is able to participate and access the public services that they require.

It is critical to recognise the role of this place on legislation. It must be about the identification of need. In a personal capacity, I am a small government politician. I do not support legislation for legislation's sake. It is a significant mistake for people to look at this Assembly and judge it on, as Paul Frew said, the quantity and not the quality. I urge Members to take caution because, when we look back over the past 17 years since restoration in 2007, we see that a number of the significant challenges and problems that we have faced have been to do with legislation or policy that ought to have been better and ought to have been scrutinised, with problems identified at an earlier stage. We have had to spend considerable time trying to address those problems.

Mr Elliott: I thank the deputy First Minister for giving way. I fully agree with her that those issues need to be scrutinised and better looked at. On the programme that we are debating, the ministerial statement says:

"An RHI Scheme Bill will make provision for the future of the scheme."

However, there is no detail whatsoever. It would be helpful if there were more detail on that.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, an important point on the legislative programme, as was touched on by the Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office, is that this programme represents what Ministers have put forward but is very much in the context that the content of the legislation still needs to be agreed. It will need to be scrutinised by the Executive Committee and then by the Assembly Committees. The actual policies in those Bills are not yet agreed. Some of them we have a greater understanding of than others, but that will have to come forward. You are absolutely right that, on this issue, it is important that we get it right. That is the point that I was making around the role of the Assembly and of its Committees. In the Northern Ireland Assembly, Committees have a very particular role, which is different from that

of Committees elsewhere: it is not just to scrutinise but to aid and support Ministers on policy development. That presents an incredible opportunity for Committees. I would like to see all of us commit to ensuring that we do not value quantity or speed over quality and getting things right. We absolutely have to scrutinise —

Mr McGrath: Will the deputy First Minister give way?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Unfortunately, I have only 10 minutes, and I have a lot of contributions to touch on, I am afraid. I want to be fair to as many people as possible

Like a number of Members, Deborah Erskine mentioned her policy brief in relation to her chairing of the Infrastructure Committee, which is very welcome. I touch again on the point that, if the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive are to deliver and have the determination to deliver, we will only do so by working hand in hand with the Committees, relying on them to call the relevant witnesses to really scrutinise the legislation to ensure that we are doing the right thing. I welcome the contributions from Deborah and other members of the Committees.

Steve Aiken mentioned the Programme for Government. As indicated yesterday, we are in the same position as Scotland and Wales. All three jurisdictions were in an advanced position with their programmes for government, and all three, having taken guidance about the election period, will not be publishing them. That is right and proper. I would love to say that the Programme for Government is so good that to publish it would give an electoral advantage to the First Minister and I, but, of course, that is what the guidance is there to caution against. I have no doubt that there will be a variety of views on the Programme for Government. Of course, we will publish it for consultation, because we want to hear those views and improve it. We are very mindful of our responsibilities during the election period, but we are determined to get it published as soon as possible following that.

Some Members referenced using the summer period for consultation. We acknowledge that using the summer period for consultation on legislation or policy is not ideal, but it allows people a little bit of extra time. We would have to consult into the autumn, as well, to ensure that there is adequate consultation time.

The policy area of a duty of candour was mentioned by a number of Members, and I add

my support to that. I was not here for questions to the Health Minister yesterday, but there was a reference to "the black box" then. There is an excellent book called 'Black Box Thinking' that deals with that very particular point. It talks about why so much goes wrong, such as medical negligence and other issues, and focuses on the specific issue of candour. There is an important point on candour, not just relevant to our health sector but across all our policy areas and all our legislation: we need to be open and frank on what works and what does not work. If something is not working, let us get it changed; let us work together to try to address it. That is the only way that we will improve things.

Mr Swann: Will the deputy First Minister give way?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Unfortunately, I have only a minute and a half left.

I want to add to that point by saying that it is incredibly important that we are fully aware of the impact of what we are doing on all the issues. I come back, again, to the point about quantity in relation to legislation. When we speak to people on the doors, as all of us will be doing over the next number of weeks, the key issue that we hear about, time and again, is that people want their public services to work for them, such as access to GP services and affordable childcare, in health and education respectively, and all those types of issues. We are also conscious, however, that legislation is not always the answer to the problem. Sometimes the answer will be transformation, restructuring and getting the right policies in place. The Committees have an important role in all those things, as does the House.

I thank Members for their contributions to the debate. It has been very useful, and important issues have been raised. I urge people to consider this, however: let us get the right legislation, prioritising quality over quantity and consideration and scrutiny over speed. That is what the people of Northern Ireland demand of us and that is what will deliver for people throughout Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the Executive's legislation programme as presented by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in their statement of 23 May 2024.

Defective Premises Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister for Communities, Mr Gordon Lyons, to move the Consideration Stage of the Defective Premises Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities).]

Mr Speaker: Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments detailing the single amendment for debate. The amendment will be debated under the group headed:

"Defective materials, products and design features etc."

I remind Members that, once the debate on the group is completed, the Questions on the amendment and clauses stand part will be put. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

12.30 pm

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Mr Speaker: We now come to the single amendment for debate. I call Daniel McCrossan to move the amendment.

Mr McCrossan: I beg to move the following amendment:

After clause 1 insert -

"Defective materials, products and design features etc.

1A. In the Defective Premises (Northern Ireland) Order 1975 after Article 4 insert—

'Defective materials, products and design features etc.

4B.—(1) The Department may, by regulations, specify—

(a) particular building materials;

(b) particular building products;

(c) structural design features; and

(d) any other construction details as the Department may consider appropriate,

which are likely to give rise to a cause of action under Article 3 [or Article 4A].

(2) The Department shall have due regard to the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1979, and guidance published under those Regulations, when specifying any materials, products, features or other construction details under paragraph (1).

(3) An action shall not be deemed to fail solely on the grounds that the premises in question does not feature a material, product, feature or other detail specified in regulations made under paragraph (1).

(4) The provisions of this section shall be without prejudice to other considerations the court may deem relevant in the determination of an action under this Order.

(5) Regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before and approved by a resolution of the Assembly.

(6) Before any regulations are laid before the Assembly, the Department shall lay a report with the Assembly detailing the factors which will inform the content of the regulations.'"

Mr McCrossan: As outlined in a contribution to the Second Stage debate, this is not the way in which we prefer to do business. Accelerated passage is not the most appropriate way for legislators to consider legislation that will have a direct impact on the lives of our citizens. It is right and proper that we go through the accountability and scrutiny mechanisms that are there. On this occasion, the Committee process was bypassed. That said, we recognise the importance of the Bill. Although we have some concerns, we recognise the importance of aligning with the legislation that is in place for the rest of the UK. We also recognise that that should have been done some time ago. That said, there are wider issues here in Northern Ireland, and there will potentially be further issues down the line with defective materials, products and design features. In the amendment, we allow some protection for those who may be affected. As the Bill's explanatory and financial memorandum explains, there is significant disparity between Northern Ireland and England and Wales on the limitation periods for legal action where a building is shown to be defective. That is why the Minister introduced the Bill.

The purpose of the amendment is to address a particular gap in the Bill's provisions. At the outset, I emphasise that the amendment is Bill-friendly. By that, I mean that it does not interfere with the Bill's purposes: it imposes no direct burden on the Department, as the new clause is an enabling one that gives the Department permissive rather than prescriptive powers; it places no financial burden on the Department; and it is designed, in the spirit of the Bill, to extend its support a little wider. Members will notice that the amendment does not alter a single word of the Bill as laid but is constructed as an additional clause. That is my deliberate choice, to ensure that the Bill's overarching intentions are unaltered.

I am sure that all Members are aware of the horror stories that have emanated from places such as Donegal, Mayo and other counties across the island of Ireland concerning the shocking effects of defective building materials, including mica, pyrite and reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC), on domestic premises. This affects not just domestic premises. There is every sign that various aspects of all infrastructure have been affected as a result of those defective materials. Young families have been left devastated as their homes cracked from bottom to top and leaked water, making them very difficult to live in and, in some instances, dangerous because they were literally falling down around them. It has also affected more mature couples, whose life savings, which they had put into building their dream homes, have disappeared overnight.

In this instance, there is huge concern, particularly in border constituencies, that the issues that we have seen play out in Donegal and in other counties across Ireland will affect people here. I get the sense that people are reluctant to come forward because there is no mechanism to support them — no real advice is available — and there is huge fear as a result of what they have seen in Donegal. Here is a map of the border counties that are affected. There are 5,700 homes affected by those defective materials. If we look at the map, we can see the border, which shows clearly why there is huge concern that defective materials have undoubtedly appeared in homes across my constituency of West Tyrone, the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone and across Derry and beyond.

At some stage in the not-too-distant future, people will start to come forward, as some already have. In my constituency, a young family was affected. Their dreams were shattered, and their house was left in a terrible state of disrepair. They do not know where to

turn to, and they cannot get advice or support. They believe that the future looks quite bleak when it comes to getting any support. In my colleagues' constituency of Foyle, we have seen families speak out as well, and we believe that there are examples right across the entirety of Northern Ireland and Ireland, North and South. The use of defective building materials will have a huge impact on people's mental health, as will their concerns about how the issue can be dealt with. Although the situation has happened as a result of the use of defective building materials and, for a long time, there seemingly being no fit-for-purpose remedy to the unfolding disaster, as I have previously stated in the Assembly, it is inconceivable that such defective building materials are to be found on only one side of the border. It is surely not a matter of whether they will be found but rather when they will be found, and to what extent. The amendment would enable the Assembly and the Department to be ready.

I seek to extend the legal protections that the Bill provides to situations that previous experience tells us are likely to emerge in our jurisdiction. I appreciate that the Minister intends to bring a more substantive Bill to the House in the future and that its provisions may afford a remedy to the matters to which I draw Members' attention. Introducing such a Bill is some time off, however, particularly given the pace of movement in the Assembly and the uncertainty, which was very clear in the past, over whether this place will function. When an issue is foreseeable and a remedy is at hand, why would we not put plans for it in place today? The point of the amendment is to put protections in place today so that it readies the Department to act. I therefore urge the Assembly to support the amendment and its genuine intention.

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities): I appreciate the Member's giving way. I hope that he understands my sincerity in asking this question: what does he believe that the legal effect of the amendment would be? The building materials that he is talking about are already covered under building regulations. He wants the Department to specify a list of materials, but he is not making that list exclusive, and there is already a legislative remedy. The point of a Bill is to change the law, and the amendment does not appear to me to achieve any substantial legal effect, so what is the point of it?

Mr McCrossan: I will put it this way: if the House or the Department finds itself in a similar situation with the scale of the number of homes

affected, the Minister will not be asking, "What is the point?". The reality is that, in response to such a situation, people will be asking, "What are you doing about it?". The amendment would put in place regulations to specify areas that the Department must consider in order to protect those who may be affected as a result of defective building materials.

Mr Lyons: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: I will finish my point. The Minister said that the matter is already covered by regulations. Those regulations sit with the Department of Finance, as the Minister knows. In fact, it was only this week that the Minister did not even believe that it was a devolved matter, as far as I remember. Hopefully, he has sought clarification on that since.

The legal advice that I obtained believes that the amendment would in no way have any effect on the Bill's current clauses. That is my view. I do not believe that it would in any way interfere with what is laid out in the Minister's Bill. The reality at the centre of the matter is this: homes across Northern Ireland will undoubtedly be affected by defective building materials. At this juncture, we can ensure that we put in place mechanisms that will allow people to seek help where they can. It also will prepare the Department and, indeed, the Executive for dealing with the issue. Does the Minister want in?

Mr Lyons: I appreciate the Member's giving way, but, with respect, he has not answered the question of what legal effect the amendment would have. He is not creating an exclusive list of materials and saying, "It must be under this". He is saying, "Here is a list. I want you to go out and think of all the materials that can come into it". His amendment says that a material not being on the list does not preclude action being taken. He acknowledges in his amendment that the regulations exist. His proposed new paragraph 4B(2) states:

"The Department shall have due regard to the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1979".

That is entirely covered. You are bringing nothing new to the table; the amendment has no legal effect.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for that intervention. We are providing clarification, because, in reality, throughout the process, as is typical of how the DUP and, indeed, Sinn Féin have done government in the past, there

has been no proper scrutiny of important legislation that will have unintended consequences. It is ironic that the Minister has concerns about the legal implications of an amendment — a positive amendment — to a Bill that has not received the scrutiny that it should and must receive. No lessons have been learnt from legislation previously brought through the House, even though there were clear warnings and signals at that point —.

Mr Lyons: Will the Member give way, for scrutiny of his amendment?

Mr McCrossan: The Minister has said enough. He did not want to take advice in Committee. Some Executive Ministers want to take advice only when it suits them. They wanted to bypass the Committee Stage of this legislation and avoid due scrutiny of the Bill. I could go into the intricacies of the legal advice received and the concerns about the legislation, of which the Minister will be well aware, as he will be aware of the concerns expressed by various stakeholders and witnesses about the Minister's pace in getting it through the House.

The Minister should understand that, with great caution, we support the Bill, but we are raising considerable concern about it. If the Minister wants to ensure that there is as wide a net as possible to protect people who are affected by defective premises, and if mica, RAAC and pyrite are in the homes of people in Tyrone, Donegal and Derry, the Minister would do well to remember his words in the House today. If he supports the amendment, at least he can say that he was ahead of the ball, which is not something that can be said very often of the DUP, let alone the Executive.

I put to the House this important amendment. The reach, if I may describe it that way, of the amendment is contained in paragraph 4B(1), sub-paragraphs (a) to (d). Those provisions enable the Department to specify by regulation, as the Minister has pointed out, deficiencies that could give cause for action, and they will greatly strengthen the hand of anyone seeking redress through the courts.

I regret not being able to speak to colleagues in other parties before today about the amendment, particularly those on the Communities Committee, of which I am a member. The use of accelerated passage made that impossible, and the timing was challenging. However, I can provide a measure of assurance by noting that the Bill Office was very helpful. Indeed, the Bill Office has provided invaluable advice and support to enable me to draft this important amendment with appropriate wording

and to ensure that it is fit for purpose. Members will note that the Department, in taking action by making regulations, is required to "have due regard" to our existing building regulations and that those new regulations:

"may not be made unless a draft of the regulation has been laid before and approved by ... the Assembly."

As I indicated earlier, I know that these building regulations are under the responsibility of the Department of Finance and some cross-departmental working between Executive Ministers will be required — something that, again, does not happen as much as it should. Furthermore, a report must be provided to the Assembly:

"detailing the factors which will inform the content of the regulations."

The measures ensure that the Committee for Communities and, indeed, the Assembly can scrutinise developments in future. I trust that those "safety features" — that is what I describe them as — will give the Assembly enough confidence in the amendment to support it. If we in Northern Ireland are affected to the same extent as homeowners across Ireland, we will face a major crisis. I do not say that my amendment saves the day, but it lays a clear pathway for people who are affected to seek support and action where appropriate.

In reality, for the past number of years, in the time that the House has been sitting, I have written to multiple Ministers of each relevant Department, asking what they are doing to help to identify traces of pyrite, RAAC and mica in homes across Northern Ireland.

I received a very blunt, one-line response to say, "I have no knowledge of it". It is a partitionist mentality that believes those materials did not cross the border, and, indeed, it is arrogant to assume that no other quarry has manufactured products that may be defective and affecting homes across Northern Ireland.

12.45 pm

Have any lessons been learned on this side of the border from how the crisis in the South unfolded that left 5,700 families in dire circumstances? The Minister is far away from Tyrone, but when the chickens come home to roost, as I believe they will, the House had better be ready, because it will be a huge crisis. Closing your eyes and blocking your ears will

not resolve what, potentially, could be on the track. The amendment is positive; it adds protections for people who are affected or potentially will be affected, right across the North of Ireland.

The reality is that I have already heard about and visited multiple affected homes. People's concern is that there is no support, Stormont is not listening — if it is even functioning at various points — and if they are in that situation, what are they going to do and where will they turn? The only authority that I have seen take any action is Derry City and Strabane District Council, which allowed people to come forward and register concern if they believed that their home was affected. That is the only positive action that I have seen during a crisis that is five minutes from my doorstep, where thousands of people's homes and dreams have been destroyed.

If the House chooses to ignore what potentially could be a huge crisis, it will reap the consequences, but if we get ahead of the ball and start reaching out to identify the number of homes that are, or potentially will be, affected, we can mitigate what could be a disaster for public finances in Northern Ireland but also for homeowners right across Northern Ireland. This is here; people need to recognise it. The scale of it will only be determined in the future, but the Departments and the Executive need to be conscious that there is a very serious problem down the line.

Ms Ferguson: Every individual or family has a right to a safe, secure home that is suitable for their needs and of a decent standard. We have a duty to ensure that no one is left behind. As discussed in our contributions, our support for the Bill is primarily due to the need to address the existing legislative disparities that face residents here and to ensure that we provide a workable avenue for those seeking legal redress. It is based on assurances from the Minister and the Department that the Bill is effective, proportionate and fit for purpose, and that he is cognisant of the concerns raised with him to date. That is of particular importance, given the use of accelerated passage and the absence of the Committee Stage. The Committee Stage is often an important forum to discuss potential amendments to a Bill, such as that debated today. Accelerated passage is not and should not be the norm to progress legislation. However, in this instance, an immediate remedy is required for affected residents and homeowners.

The proposed amendment gives the Department the power to make regulations

specifying particular building materials, products, design features and any other construction details that it considers are likely to give rise to a cause of action. While, in principle, that seems positive, I also note the Minister's comments during the Second Stage debate when he stated:

"It is intended that the legislation will offer owners the opportunity for legal recourse if defective materials have rendered a premises defective." — [Official Report (Hansard), 3 June 2024, p64, col 2].

I want the Minister to clarify today whether "defective materials" is sufficiently included in the current Bill. Ultimately, we want to support affected residents and homeowners to ensure parity with limitation periods elsewhere and to provide an avenue to seek legal redress for defective premises.

We also recognise that it is imperative that we make continuous improvements in respect of building safety and standards. Further work is urgently needed regarding the development of a wider building safety Bill here. That will assist us in supporting the built environment industry and building control professionals to achieve only the highest standards of safety and accountability.

Ms Mulholland: I welcome the Bill's Consideration Stage. As has been mentioned, accelerated passage is not the ideal mechanism, but it is necessary, given the concerns that have necessitated expediency on the issue.

I concur with the Member who spoke previously and the Deputy Chair of the Communities Committee. We want to see a more fulsome Bill come forward, but we are aware of the limitations of the mandate. It is something that my colleagues and I will push for as we proceed, because we want to see the fulsome address of our building regulations.

We will not support the amendment. We understand that the intention behind it is to enhance the safety and quality of buildings, but significant issues could be unintended. The proposed clause grants the Department the authority to specify particular building materials, products and design features through regulations. That broad, sweeping power raises several concerns. We are at risk of creating a more rigid and overly prescriptive regulatory environment. Protection is already present in the Building Regulations (NI) Order. Additionally, there are some concerns around the amendment adding any substantial value to

the Bill. It prescribes for actions already covered in existing duty provisions in article 3.

The proposed clause mandates the Department to consider existing building regulations but does not adequately mitigate the potential for conflict and confusion. It just adds another layer of specifications that could lead to inconsistencies. My party and I believe that the Bill has to be enacted swiftly to address the urgent issues at hand to achieve parity with England and Wales.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. She outlines that the amendment could pose unintended consequences in its legal effect. Does she agree with me that the Bill, through accelerated passage, will have significant unintended consequences, of which we are well warned?

Ms Mulholland: I thank the Member for his intervention. I have said that accelerated passage is not the preferred method or mechanism for doing this business. However, I am aware that the expediency with which we have to put the Bill in place necessitates this approach. I understand where the Member is coming from.

I want to emphasise that my opposition to the amendment does not come from a disregard for people's safety and the well-being of our residents. On the contrary: I am acutely aware of the importance of ensuring that every home in Northern Ireland is safe and secure, and I cannot even begin to imagine the experiences of those who live in defective premises. They cannot be overlooked or minimised. Those individuals or families have only one place that they call home, and it is our duty to protect them immediately, which is why I support the expediency that is afforded by the Bill.

While the proposed amendment to the Bill is well-intentioned, it presents significant challenges and risks. We have to strive for a solution that protects residents from defective buildings, and, by opposing the amendment, we can ensure that the Bill progresses quickly and effectively, addressing the urgent needs of our residents without unnecessary complication.

Mr Allen: At this point, I do not intend to restate the comments that I made in the accelerated passage debate and at Second Stage. They are on the public record and available for people to read.

I turn to the amendment. We believe that, in seeking to specify defective materials, products

and design features, the proposed amendment to the Defective Premises Bill is not necessary. The current law already mandates that the construction work be performed in a workmanlike or professional manner, using proper materials, ensuring that the dwelling is fit for habitation upon completion. It is our view that that requirement inherently includes the use of safe and appropriate materials and design features. We are of the view that the existing legislation covers the aspects that the amendment intends to cover. During the Second Stage debate, the Member opposite highlighted concerns about specific building materials, and many across the House share those concerns and echoed them today. I assume that that, as he stated, is what he is attempting to capture in the amendment. The Minister stated during the Second Stage debate that the Bill:

"provides more time to hold to account those responsible for building the house or carrying out work on it, in order to ensure that the work is of the highest quality and is done using the best materials for the job." — [Official Report (Hansard), 3 June 2024, p58, col 2].

I am happy to give way to the Minister if he wishes to clarify whether there is a necessity to specify defective materials, products and design features by regulation in order to enhance the level of protection that is provided.

Mr Lyons: I am happy to clarify to the Member and the Deputy Chair that that is not necessary, because the existing regulations cover those and they do not need to be specifically identified in order for that action to be taken. Where a material, product or structural design is known to lead to defective premises, there are already legislative solutions in place to restrict or even deny its use, namely, part B of the materials and workmanship section of the building regulations.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for that clarity. That was our interpretation. I would have liked the opportunity to engage with the Member more broadly in order to scope that out. Indeed, as other Members said, it would have been preferential to have had the opportunity, notwithstanding what I said during the accelerated passage debate, to explore some of those aspects during Committee Stage, but that was not the case, as per the will of the House. On that, I will end my comments.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm today. I propose,

therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when we will have Question Time. The debate will resume immediately after Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.57 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Infrastructure

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: We will start with listed questions. Questions 3 and 11 have been withdrawn.

Potholes: Intervention Depth

1. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he will restore the pothole intervention level depth from 50 mm to 20 mm. (AQO 570/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure): My Department has been operating in a difficult financial environment for a number of years due to underfunding and austerity by the British Government. In response, my Department has had to reduce its road maintenance activities to a limited service that prioritises delivery of essential services for maintaining public safety and protecting the transport network. Consequently, only the highest-priority defects across the network are currently being repaired. That means that defects greater than 50 mm in depth are being repaired across all roads. However, on high-traffic urban and rural roads, defects greater than 20 mm are also being repaired. The level of repairs that can be carried out in any financial year depends on the funding available to my Department. I continue to engage with my Executive colleagues to ensure that my Department is properly resourced and funded.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Over the past year, the sheer number and scale of potholes in the North Down constituency has been truly shocking and a cause of great concern for the community that I represent. One example is the busy Castle Park Road in Bangor, which has a surface more akin to the surface of the moon. It has, so far, not been resurfaced as the potholes are millimetres short of the 50 mm. When will the Minister take proper action to address our roads crisis and restore the depth to 50 mm, as it was in 2015-16?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. We are taking all actions available to us. The Member will be acutely aware that

Ministers from all Departments and parties are under significant financial pressure. Since going into the Department, I have engaged with my departmental colleagues on how we improve public services as best we can with the limited public resources available to us. We have set in place a plan for reacting to potholes. I accept that potholes are an issue on many roads, but that is not only the case in this jurisdiction: in the South, England, Scotland and Wales, there is also a potholes crisis. It all goes back to this one issue: 14 years of austerity leading to a deterioration in public services and public infrastructure. Our roads are a glaring example of that.

Mr McAleer: Minister, given the prevalence of potholes, what is your assessment of the use of concrete for road repairs?

Mr O'Dowd: Generally, concrete surfacing is used only on rigid pavement construction where all pavement layers are concrete. There are few roads here of that type, and, because of that, concrete is not considered a suitable option for maintenance resurfacing on the existing road network. The use of concrete road surfacing also raises environmental concerns, including noise and embodied carbon. It entails high initial costs, excessive maintenance costs and high replacement costs at the end of life.

Ms Egan: I concur with my North Down colleague that Castle Park Road in Bangor is an absolute mess. It is not just the depth of the potholes that your Department will not resurface but the number of them. The number of potholes is dangerous for cyclists. They are also near a school, and it is a busy road. Please, Minister, will you listen to us and resurface it?

Mr O'Dowd: As the Member will be aware, when reports of potholes come in, they are logged in the local section office. Where there is a group of potholes, they are most likely to be inspected by the inspection and maintenance team. Where they meet the criteria, they will be repaired. Where there are significant numbers of potholes in the one area and the resources are available, we will resurface significant stretches of road, as Members have seen in recent months in different areas. I am minded that the June monitoring round is coming up, and I will make a bid in relation to road maintenance to ensure that our network is maintained as well as it can be in the current scenario.

As I said to the Members who asked the previous questions, many of our public services

are crumbling. The thing about roads is that you see that happening physically in front of you. That is what happens when you have had an austerity agenda at the heart of the British Government for the past decade.

Alleyways: North Belfast

2. **Mr Kingston** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline what measures he and his officials are taking, with other statutory agencies, to address the non-cleaning of unadopted alleyways in North Belfast. (AQO 571/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department is not responsible for the inspection or maintenance of unadopted alleyways that are in the ownership of other parties. It is the Department's policy not to adopt alleyways and pathways that are not essential for safe vehicular and pedestrian access and where the area is already served by a good network of public footways. My Department has been operating, as I have said, in a difficult financial environment for a number of years. My Department fully supports the efforts in local communities to improve the appearance of back entries and other similar spaces in their areas to enhance community pride, reduce antisocial behaviour and improve the general area, and we will continue to engage with statutory agencies and stakeholders in an advisory capacity on the issue. Officials from my Department attended a workshop on unadopted alleyways hosted by Belfast City Council's people and communities committee in February 2024.

Mr Kingston: I thank the Minister for that stock reply. As the Minister, the Principal Deputy Speaker and other Members will be aware, unadopted alleyways are a major problem in Belfast, particularly in areas of older housing. No statutory agency will take responsibility, and, particularly with the growth of private landlords, you get alleyways that become a hazard for residents. They cannot put out their bins, and some areas get severely overgrown and become a fire risk because people cannot get out or a fire engine cannot get in. I note what the Minister said about a meeting held at the council. Is the Minister willing to continue or commence discussion with, in particular, Belfast City Council and the Housing Executive to find a solution or to support resolution of the matter? No one wants to take responsibility, and it is a real issue that affects many residents.

Mr O'Dowd: I certainly think that there is a responsibility to continue to engage, whether with Belfast City Council, any other council or

the Housing Executive, to see whether we can find a common solution to these matters. The unfortunate thing is that, when Departments are dealing with constrained budgets and reduced staff numbers, they have to prioritise their statutory functions, which does not allow them to carry out other matters that they would like to do. I certainly want to see my Department playing its full part in local communities and engaging with and supporting them to improve the environment that people live in, but I do not want to overpromise or lead people on a merry dance by suggesting that there will be a solution from my Department to this. However, my Department and I will play our part in discussions. As we all know in this place, it is good to talk, and you may find a solution by doing that.

Mr Baker: Does the Minister agree that it is important that all public infrastructure, including our footpaths and roads, is well maintained and kept clean?

Mr O'Dowd: I agree, but, unfortunately, when you get into the bureaucracy of government, you sometimes find that you have to find out who owns that public infrastructure. That is the challenge for each Department. However, as I said to Mr Kingston, I am more than happy to play my part, along with my Department, in engaging with any of our councils or the Housing Executive on how we can find solutions. One of the solutions may well be empowering communities and seeing how we can engage with communities and community organisations on how we can support them to maintain areas that are not under the ownership of any Department.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Grass Verge Cutting

4. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline what resources he will allocate to grass verge cutting to improve visibility when exiting junctions. (AQO 573/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: It is my intention that my Department will deliver a full programme of grass cutting in accordance with the new approach to verge management across the road network that I announced in October 2022. That new approach increases the focus on protecting wildlife and promoting biodiversity without compromising road safety and will support the actions needed to comply with the Climate Change Act passed by the Assembly in 2022.

All my Department's operational areas implement a blended approach through the use of internal and external contractors for the delivery of verge management. Staff from my Department's internal contractor have been trained in various duties depending on need, such as grass cutting, patching, gully emptying and other responsive duties. Therefore, they are not dedicated solely to grass cutting but provide a uniquely flexible resource.

Grass-cutting schedules are prepared at a local level to ensure that two cuts are completed within the timescales laid out in policy. Schedules include additional cuts of areas such as sight lines at junctions, and further responsive treatment at junctions is also undertaken as resources permit.

External contractors are used to supplement my Department's internal resources and operate in a similar manner, completing grass cutting in accordance with instructed schedules.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. One of the main issues is sight lines at junctions. Contractors are inclined to take one swathe with a width of around 1 metre or 1.5 metres, which is totally unacceptable and still does not give a clear sight line. The Minister needs to look at that issue.

Mr O'Dowd: Whether the work is done by staff in my Department or by contractors, there must be a clear sight line at a junction. I am certainly not of the view that they are restricted to a 1-metre strip in any area. They are contracted to ensure safety at junctions. That is paramount. I will certainly review that with my officials to make sure that I am correct. I have reduced areas of grass cutting, but I certainly have not reduced sight lines. They are paramount for road safety.

Miss Brogan: Will the Minister consider a wildflower planting scheme for road verges to promote biodiversity?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes. We work with a number of councils and organisations to promote biodiversity along road verges and at major junctions and roundabouts. I have previously mentioned Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council in the Chamber as an exemplar of how those things can be done. The Department for Infrastructure is a major landowner. A lot of that land is along roadsides, and we plan on using it more and more to increase biodiversity and wildflower distribution. Again, some of it comes back to resources, but, if we can work in partnership with others, it will

be an exciting project that will enhance the aesthetic look of many areas.

Ms Mulholland: The Minister has just mentioned the Causeway coast and glens, part of my constituency. There is a divergent approach across my constituency, because it straddles two council areas. Will the Minister commit to writing to councils to try to get them to take one approach to biodiversity, wildflowers and grass cutting?

Mr O'Dowd: When I was in post previously, I corresponded with councils and other statutory landowners about that. I am more than happy to do so again.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for clarifying the issue. Sadly, the reality is that, in East Antrim — in Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey — large areas at junctions remain uncut, which has led to a number of near misses. In the areas that have been cut to date, the quality of the cutting is less than satisfactory and has led to a number of complaints. What scrutiny is the Department doing to analyse the work of contractors to ensure that the cutting is up to standard and is being done on time, as it should be?

Mr O'Dowd: Members should contact their local section office first about such matters, as, I am sure, they do. If there are areas of specific concern, Members should contact my private office, and I will ensure that their concern is followed up.

The contract for grass cutting is ongoing. Contractors are out cutting grass at present, as is my team in the Department. It is an operation on a huge scale. I emphasise time and time again, however, that sight lines are a priority and that verges should be cut properly.

Floods: Downpatrick

5. **Mrs Mason** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the ongoing review of the 2023 floods in Downpatrick. (AQO 574/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: Following the significant flooding that occurred in autumn 2023 across the south and east, including Downpatrick, a joint organisational learning review is well under way to capture any learning identified on preparedness, response and recovery to inform any future collective civil contingencies preparations. While the review is being coordinated by the Executive Office, my

Department, along with the Department for Communities and local government, is leading the way on the aspects for which it is responsible.

An independent consultant, Jacobs, has been appointed to assist and provide an independent technical insight into the causes of the flooding and to present considerations to inform any viable solutions. Public open evenings will be held later this month from 4.00 pm to 7.00 pm at the following locations: Portadown on 25 June; Downpatrick on 26 June; and Newry on 27 June. Invitations have been issued to those affected, and the Department has issued social media notices to promote attendance. It is intended that a formal report will be compiled by the end of June 2024, with its findings and recommendations made publicly available thereafter.

2.15 pm

Mrs Mason: I welcome the ongoing work that the Minister's Department and others are doing for businesses and homeowners in Downpatrick, and I look forward to attending the information session. Is there an update on the homeowner flood protection grant scheme?

Mr O'Dowd: The homeowner flood protection scheme is available to homeowners. The grant covers up to 90% of costs to a maximum of £10,000, following a survey of the estimated costs. The homeowner is required to make a contribution of 10% of the survey and estimated installation costs, plus any additional costs that may be incurred above £10,000. Further information on the homeowner flood protection grant scheme is available on my Department's website. To date, 130 installations have been completed at a cost of approximately £1 million.

Mr McMurray: Can the Minister provide an update on the work to develop a flood forecasting system and say whether he is actively working with other Departments to deliver that?

Mr O'Dowd: I have been engaging with my officials on that matter, and we are seeking investment, if we can, through various monitoring rounds or other programmes that the Executive may run now and in the future. If we can properly resource it and put it in place, it will be an extremely beneficial scheme. I am examining ways to deliver that.

Mr McGrath: Whilst I appreciate that it is not the Minister's fault, when we met officials after the floods, we were told that the report would

be available by June of this year, which might have allowed some work to take place over the summer and, therefore, ease business owners' concerns that the floods might happen again in October. To hear that it has been pushed back to next year will make business owners very concerned. Is there any mitigation available in the time in between? We do not want to see a repeat this autumn of what we saw last year.

Mr O'Dowd: Perhaps I misled the Member or spoke incorrectly. It is intended that the formal report will be compiled by the end of June 2024. The findings of that report will be available to us. We have not been standing still: my Department and my officials are still examining how we can support communities across the North that have been impacted by flooding. We want to learn lessons very quickly. I assure the Member that, when the report becomes available to me, I and my departmental colleagues will act quickly to bring forward the report's recommendations as soon as possible.

Mrs Erskine: The Infrastructure Committee received information about properties that are at risk of flood. For example, 45,000 properties are located in at-risk areas, and, when you add climate change to that, there are an additional 14,800 at-risk properties. The Committee has asked for a breakdown of where those properties are. I am cognisant of the fact that the budget position is not exactly helpful in relation to prioritising schemes. Will the Minister detail what he intends to do about flood alleviation schemes for that significant number of properties in Northern Ireland?

Mr O'Dowd: I am finalising my current capital budget and will publish it later. It will indicate the funding for flood prevention schemes. Work is ongoing, although I do not have the exact figures in front of me for that investment. We are investing in flood defence schemes across the piece, and some are at a more advanced stage than others. Of course, I would like more finances and a bigger budget to carry out those schemes, but I have to deal with the budget that I have and use it to its maximum, and I will do that.

I am looking at the home flood defence scheme. Currently, under that scheme, if your area is scheduled for a flood alleviation scheme or major works, you may not be entitled to the home flood defence scheme. I am looking at that to see whether we can be more flexible with that. Despite our best efforts, some flood alleviation schemes take several years to deliver, and some of them can be very complex. You have to match opportunity with budget. I

am looking at other ways of supporting homeowners and businesses to protect their homes and properties from floods.

A7 Crossgar Road, Saintfield

6. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline his Department's plans to complete the upgrade of the A7 Crossgar Road, Saintfield. (AQO 575/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: The A7 from Belfast to Downpatrick forms part of the strategic road network and is classed as a link corridor. The A7 Rowallane to Doran's Rock scheme proposes to widen approximately 1,500 metres of existing carriageway to improve the forward visibility, with a wide verge on one side and a footpath on the other. The scheme was at an advanced stage of development several years ago, with the design work and an environmental assessment for the scheme being substantially complete. However, the scheme, regrettably, was not taken forward due to other priorities at that time.

My Department is currently developing proposals for a new regional strategic transport network transport plan, which will set out the priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks. I will consider proposals for improvements to the A7 as part of that process. The transport plan is still in development, but, once I have identified my preferred options and priorities, a draft document setting those out will be issued for public consultation, giving everyone an opportunity to have their views heard.

Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. The resurfacing scheme on the B7 road from Ballylone to Drumnaconagher in Ballynahinch is now almost complete, and I thank him and his Department for that. Will the Minister please advise when the second phase of that scheme is scheduled to take place at the Crossgar end of the B7, as that section is equally broken up and uneven?

Mr O'Dowd: My officials are aware of the condition of the B7 road at Crossgar, and any need for resurfacing will be prioritised against other roads in the division and programmed on the basis of available funding. The division programmes are currently being prepared and will be published in due course. In the meantime, my officials will continue to inspect and repair defects that meet the current limited services intervention level to protect public safety.

Mr Mathison: The Minister will be aware of how critical the delivery of the Ballynahinch bypass is for the area that Mr Harvey highlighted. Will the Minister confirm when we will receive a further update on the delivery of that scheme?

Mr O'Dowd: I am working through my capital budgets, and, once I have done that, I will further engage with my officials responsible for major road improvements. I am keen to deliver the Ballynahinch scheme. It is a worthwhile project and will bring huge benefits not only to the town of Ballynahinch but further afield. It is a case of matching budgets with the opportunity at the time, but it is certainly, in my mind, an active scheme that I wish to progress during my tenure in this post.

A5 Western Transport Corridor

7. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on when he plans to publish the report following the public inquiry on the A5 western transport corridor. (AQO 576/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: The A5 western transport corridor is a critically important infrastructure and flagship project for the Executive. The Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) issued its final advisory report from the latest public inquiry process in 2020 and 2023 to the Department on 31 October 2023. That report included 30 advisory recommendations, many of which are detailed and require legal and professional review, advice and input. That complex process is now close to completion.

I will be in a position to make an announcement in respect of the scheme when I have reviewed all of the relevant information in relation to the project. When I make my announcement, I will do so in accordance with all relevant statutory procedures and on the basis of all evidence, representation and advice that I have received from officials, statutory agencies North and South, members of the public and all other bodies that have participated in the process to date. My announcement will be accompanied by a statement of the reasons for the decision. That will take the form of a departmental statement, which will include a detailed response to the PAC advisory report and publication of the PAC report itself at the same time.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, 56 people have died on the A5 since 2006, and, since the Assembly came back in February, a further four people have died. The report has been on your desk

for eight months. Is there any particular reason that we should be concerned about for the delay, and can the Minister give us any steer or a concrete answer on when it will be published?

Mr O'Dowd: I am acutely conscious of the deaths on the A5, and I am acutely conscious of the deaths on the A5 since I came back into post. Throughout my time in the Department, I have prioritised engagement on the Planning Appeals Commission's report. As I said in my opening remarks, the process is highly technical, highly legal and highly complex. I am also required to carry out significant scientific data collection. The nature of that data collection means that it has taken several months. That data collection is now complete and is with a laboratory in England that will report to me in due course. When I have all the evidence, information and answers in front of me, I will be in a position to make an announcement.

Mr Honeyford: I thank the Minister for helping me with a question that I asked recently about Moira park-and-ride. I appreciate his help in allowing that project to progress.

Can the Minister give us an update on the essential upgrade of the A1 between Newry and Sprucefield? Has the project moved forward in the last couple of weeks or recent months? Is it any closer to making that road safer for the public?

Mr O'Dowd: Again, I am finalising my capital budget allocation and will make announcements later. I am committed to delivering on the A1 junction phase 2 improvements. That is another extremely busy road that has seen far too many casualties and accidents. Those road safety improvements need to be carried out. I hope to be in a position to make further announcements about that matter shortly.

Mrs Dillon: I thank the Minister and his Department for the work that they have done on the A5. I do not think that we need to reiterate the horror that has been visited on many families, not least those in my area.

I am grateful for the work that the Minister is doing to make sure that there are no further legal challenges, but can he confirm whether there have been conversations with the road safety board and the PSNI about what can be done to keep the road and the people using it as safe as possible in the interim?

Mr O'Dowd: I have had discussions with the PSNI, and the road safety partnership continues to play its part as well.

The best way to improve road safety in general is for all of us, as road users, to change our habits. Whether you are a driver, cyclist, motorcyclist or pedestrian, the action that we take on the roads decides whether we and the people we share the road with arrive home safely.

I accept that there is also a responsibility on my Department that, where measures need to be taken on engineering solutions to road safety, they should be. I continue to examine options to see whether I can identify further investment for the road and what the best use of that investment would be on further safety measures on the A5.

Road Safety

8. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on his Department's efforts to improve road safety. (AQO 577/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: It is a matter of deep regret that we continue to see so many lives lost on our roads. We must remember that each life lost is not merely a statistic but a family member, a parent, a child or a friend. Those deaths cause so much pain to families and tear communities apart. This month, I intend to bring a revised road safety strategy to the Executive for their agreement. A digital advertising campaign is nearing completion, and, last week, the British Heart Foundation became the latest organisation to partner with us by pledging to Share the Road to Zero.

The road safety strategy is an important document for refocusing minds and energy on creating safe roads, safe vehicles and safe people. However, it is only the collective efforts of us all that will truly make a difference. My officials are working alongside those in other Departments and from the emergency services to ensure that we have a single, agreed and collaborative approach to road safety. Once the outworkings of the Budget are known, officials will work with road safety partners to agree a forward action plan covering engineering, enforcement and education.

As I have said, we can all play our part in road safety and potentially in saving a life by thinking about how we act when we are travelling from A to B using roads or footpaths. We all need to wise up and take personal responsibility for

behaving in a way that keeps us and others safe on our roads.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Tá brón orm, a Phat, ach níl ach bomaite amháin agat. *[Translation: Sorry, Pat, you have only one minute.]*

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. *[Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his answer.]* Can the Minister tell us the aim of the road safety strategy?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Quickly, Minister.

Mr O'Dowd: The aim is to cut road deaths substantially, in line with ambitions and targets in other European states and across these islands.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions. Questions 6, 7 and 9 have been withdrawn.

2.30 pm

Taxi Legislation

T1. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for his assessment of the suitability and effectiveness of existing taxi legislation and to state whether he has any plans to review it. (AQT 381/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: Taxi legislation and the challenges that face our taxi industry have been raised with me many times. My view is that the main challenge that faces our taxi industry is not the current taxi legislation but the different economic factors that have come into play as people's habits have changed since COVID, their spending limits have been reduced as a result of the cost-of-living crisis and different employment opportunities have arisen for those who normally drive taxis. There is a range of issues. To date, I have not committed to reviewing taxi legislation, as resources and personnel in my Department will not allow me to do so. I have to prioritise other matters. I am committed to working alongside the taxi industry and taxi drivers to do what I can, but if I am going to do something, I want to make sure that it will be an effective response to their needs.

Mr Durkan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. *[Translation: I thank the Minister for his answer.]* The Minister has given his personal view. It certainly does not seem to be a party view, because a previous Minister, Chris Hazzard — this pre-dates COVID and the problems that the Minister outlined — expressed a desire to review the legislation on the basis that it was outdated. If it was outdated in 2016, is it not outdated now?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member should never look back in anger. This is 2024. I am now the Minister for Infrastructure, and I have to make decisions that are based on the reality that is in front of me now. The Member asked what had changed since 2016. COVID, the economy, available jobs: all those things have changed, right? So, how do we support our taxi industry? How does our legislature support our taxi industry? I am open to engaging with the taxi industry. In fact, rather than having a constant conversation about reviewing the legislation and about what one of my colleagues committed to eight years ago, I am writing to the Department for Transport in England to ask it not to proceed with the VAT increases on taxi fares and taxi operators, because that will have the most devastating impact on taxi operators.

East Londonderry: Sewerage

T2. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what discussions his Department has had with NI Water to address the sewerage capacity issues across East Londonderry. (AQT 382/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: I have had no specific conversations with NI Water about the Member's constituency, but I have had conversations with NI Water about how it faces the challenges of a budget that does not meet its immediate needs. We all accept that NI Water and other public bodies need more finance, but this is one of the areas where we will have to give leadership rather than say, "It is all terrible. There is nothing that we can do". I am confident that NI Water will do everything that is in its power to continue to deliver front-line services and to try to advance our waste water treatment works across all constituencies in a very restricted budgetary period. I will work with it in doing that. I will also work with my Executive colleagues to secure more funding for NI Water, Translink and, indeed, my Department. However, I do not intend to bury my head in the sand and say, "It is all terrible. It is all awful. We cannot do anything". My attitude to the current financial crisis is that we should work together, work with the Finance Minister,

work collectively around the Executive table and seek solutions.

Mr Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. The reality, Minister, is that the lack of infrastructure right across Northern Ireland — in East Londonderry in particular — is stopping the development of social housing and private housing. It is an emergency situation, as, I am sure, you are well aware.

Mr O'Dowd: If you do not have the capacity to invest in your public services, there will be an impact. That is just reality, but I will say this: each application must be judged on its merits. NI Water will have to make decisions on whether it can provide the waste water treatment services that a new development requires. If it cannot, can it work in conjunction with the developer to provide the services that are required, or can the developer provide those services on its own? We will have to do things differently moving forward. The other choice is to do nothing, and I do not think that that is a choice. Let us do things differently and find solutions to the problems that we face.

Glider: North to South Route

T3. **Ms Nicholl** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the north to south Glider route. (AQT 383/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: Is that phase 2 of the Glider route?

Ms Nicholl: Yes.

Mr O'Dowd: I am working with my officials to see how we can progress the next steps of delivering the decision that I made a number of years ago on the Antrim route and to move it out further than south Belfast and beyond that again. Again, we face financial challenges, but we can make progress on the first part of my decision in this term. I also want to make sure that I lay firm foundations to progress the Glider service so that it serves as many people as possible, because it has been proven to be a very effective and efficient means of delivering of public transport, and it has taken significant numbers of private vehicles off the roads.

Ms Nicholl: Thank you, Minister. When I receive casework queries from constituents in Carryduff, the number-one issue that is raised is when the Lidl will open, and the second one is whether the Glider scheme will be extended to serve Carryduff. Are you able to answer that question and commit to the Glider service extending to Carryduff?

Mr O'Dowd: The ambition is for the Glider route to proceed to Carryduff. I cannot give you a time frame, but, yes, the ambition is for the Glider service to go out as far as Carryduff.

Water Pollution

T4. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, having discovered in his work on water pollution a historical document, dated 2007, by the Utility Regulator, entitled 'Regulation of the Northern Irish water and sewerage industry: Statement of Regulatory Principles and Intent', which states, amongst other things, that there should be a reduction in the investment backlog in the foreseeable future and that there are "more exacting enforceable quality standards to be achieved", for an update on how those projected outcomes are being measured and on the work that is being done to address the investment backlog in waste water collection and treatment that presents quality compliance issues. (AQT 384/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: On the investment backlog, until this year, NI Water was fully funded in accordance with the price control period — fully funded. Until 2024-25, NI Water's investment plans have been fully funded. As a result of the Budget and 10 or 11 years of austerity under Tory rule, it will not be possible to fully fund NI Water for 2024-25 in accordance with the price control period. I am looking towards 2025-26. My officials and I are engaging with NI Water. I also met the Utility Regulator to see how we can move forward to protect our waste water treatment infrastructure and our environment.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for that answer. I will continue with a question on water quality. Can I have an update on the implementation, if there is to be any, of event duration monitors, which give notification that there will be a sewage overflow issue?

Mr O'Dowd: They are part of NI Water's future infrastructure investment plans. I will do my best to support NI Water in delivering those, because, as the Member said, they are an aid in tackling sewage and rainwater overflows into our watercourses.

Community Transport

T5. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to give a commitment that funding for community transport will not be cut in light of the 2024-25 Budget? (AQT 385/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: My budget will be announced later. I have done everything in my power to protect community transport's funding at last year's levels, including the restoration of some funding that it lost last year. Community transport, as the Member will know from her rural constituency, provides a vital service to many in the rural community. I also hope to meet Minister Muir, Minister Nesbitt and the Minister for Communities to discuss how community transport engages with and delivers services to their Departments and how they, in turn, can help to support community transport. We need a long-term sustainable plan for community transport, both for those who use the service and those who manage and work in it.

Ms Sheerin: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for his answer.*] As you outlined, Minister, community transport is vital, particularly for the most vulnerable and marginalised in rural communities. Will you provide detail on your plans for increasing the accessibility and sustainability of community transport?

Mr O'Dowd: I am not trying to put my Executive colleagues under the spotlight. What I am trying to do is bring collective thinking to community transport. Community transport provides services to shops, but it also provides services to the GP, the hospital, the dentist and the community, thereby breaking down isolation. There is common cause among several other Ministers and me in that regard. When I look at the costs that some of my Executive colleagues face in providing transport, particularly for patients in the health service, I see that community transport could play a vital role in providing a cost-effective alternative.

Planning: Delays

T8. **Mr McReynolds** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the steps that he is taking to address delays in the planning process. (AQT 388/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: Only yesterday, I met the Economy Minister on the planning process, specifically in regard to green energy. The subject that I have discussed most since coming back into post is planning. On that matter, I have met a wide range of stakeholders; I have engaged with my officials; I have met people involved in planning improvement; and I have met the commission that I formed to improve planning. We are beginning to see the green shoots of improvement.

I keep coming back to one conclusion in every discussion that I have had about planning: unless the planning application that is submitted is complete, providing all the information and environmental statements etc that are required, you will face delay. It is like any other process: if you do not get the first step right, the rest of it will not work out for you. The most important step that we will take is implementing the validation checklist, learning from the best-practice example of Belfast City Council, which, for an application to be submitted, requires a completed validation checklist to ensure that the application contains all the materials that are required.

Mr McReynolds: I thank the Minister for his response. I have heard the Minister mention the standard of applications a number of times. Will he confirm whether, in saying that, he means local, major or regionally significant applications?

Mr O'Dowd: All of them. As the Member will be aware, planning is two-tier. Councils look after the vast majority of planning applications, and there is significant variation in councils' return rate and standards. Some councils perform well in returning an application well within the set period; others do not. My Department faces challenges in that regard too. As I have said, one way of improving my Department's timescales for the return of planning applications in one simple stroke would be this: every time we receive a planning application that is not complete, we hand it back. My performance rates would go through the roof overnight. We spend too much time going back and forth, saying, "We need this", "You did not complete that", and, "Could you please clarify that?". In this day and age, that should not happen. To those who submit planning applications, I say this: get it right in the first instance, and then challenge the council, the statutory consultee or my Department if we do not get it right.

MOT Delays

T10. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the massive backlogs in the past year, for an update on his Department's efforts to address MOT delays. (AQT 390/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: Since we introduced temporary exemption certificates for five- and seven-year-old vehicles, there has been a significant improvement. My mailbox correspondence on MOTs has certainly reduced — I do not know about that of other Members — suggesting that

we have seen an improvement since those measures were introduced.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call William for a quick supplementary.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he accept that his Department was too slow in making that decision? There was a backlog, and the situation was diabolical before the decision was made.

Mr O'Dowd: In fairness, I came into office on 3 February and made the announcement in early April. It was not too bad.

2.45 pm

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The time for topical questions has ended. The Minister will be glad to know that all topical questions were covered. Handy enough. I ask Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Defective Premises Bill: Consideration Stage

Debate resumed on the following amendment:

After clause 1 insert -

"Defective materials, products and design features etc.

1A. In the Defective Premises (Northern Ireland) Order 1975 after Article 4 insert—

'Defective materials, products and design features etc.

4B.—(1) The Department may, by regulations, specify—

(a) particular building materials;

(b) particular building products;

(c) structural design features; and

(d) any other construction details as the Department may consider appropriate,

which are likely to give rise to a cause of action under Article 3 [or Article 4A].

(2) The Department shall have due regard to the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1979, and guidance published under those Regulations, when specifying any materials, products, features or other construction details under paragraph (1).

(3) An action shall not be deemed to fail solely on the grounds that the premises in question does not feature a material, product, feature or other detail specified in regulations made under paragraph (1).

(4) The provisions of this section shall be without prejudice to other considerations the court may deem relevant in the determination of an action under this Order.

(5) Regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of the regulations has been

laid before and approved by a resolution of the Assembly.

(6) Before any regulations are laid before the Assembly, the Department shall lay a report with the Assembly detailing the factors which will inform the content of the regulations.'— [Mr McCrossan.]

Mr Speaker: We now resume the Consideration Stage of the Defective Premises Bill.

Mr McGrath: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for my late addition to the list of Members to speak. I appreciate being called.

I welcome the amendment that my colleagues tabled. I want to speak for the many people whose homes are in danger owing to circumstances beyond their control. Last week, during the Second Stage debate, I referenced the pain felt by residents of Hunter's Mill in my constituency.

The development is, in part, sinking. The houses are listing, and some have been knocked down. The sewerage infrastructure is compromised, and the development's roads are uneven. NI Water has suggested that it might be 30 years before the land settles and it can do any work on the sewers, because otherwise they will simply give way once again. That has caused a difficulty with flushing toilets in some houses and with water flowing away. The road in that small development is bumpy in places, and, as a result of the land movement, it has not been adopted.

Here is a list of things that the residents are facing: their neighbours' houses have already been knocked down because they were collapsing; the sewerage pipes are cracking and giving way, which is causing sewage issues; the road network is breaking up and unadopted, which causes problems for bin collections; and no yellow grit boxes have been placed in the development, because it has not been adopted. All of that became evident after the 10-year deadline had passed for residents to use the new building insurance scheme. They have struggled to rest easy. They are having difficulty sleeping at night. They cannot sell their houses, because people cannot get mortgages to purchase them.

One significant issue is that, when planning was approved, the houses were not on the floodplain, but the floodplain has moved. Subsequent planning decisions resulted in its redirection, and that has compromised

residents' homes. Planning applications in other parts of the town have thus contributed to the pain that the residents are feeling. That is why the amendment may give them some hope, because proposed new article 4B(1)(d) states:

"any other construction details as the Department may consider appropriate".

There is an opportunity, if the amendment were to pass, for the Department to assess whether external decisions resulted in the state that the homes are in. Like the residents of Victoria Square, as well as other examples on these islands, those people bought their home in good faith. The houses are, in some instances, crumbling around them. The houses are not functioning as they should, and the residents are being left to deal with the situation, because they purchased them when none of the issues was evident.

The amendment would provide some support and give the residents a glimmer of hope that, down the line, there may be a resolution. The residents have invested their life savings in their home, which is being ruined before their eyes. I therefore hope that the situation can be assessed as a result of the amendment, which I support.

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities):

Before I address the amendment that Mr McCrossan and Mr Durkan tabled, I put on record my thanks to the Assembly, the Committee for Communities and the Executive for supporting the progress of the Bill through the House. I also offer my thanks to the Office of the Legislative Counsel for its rapid yet thorough advice on each stage of the Bill's progress so far.

I turn now to the amendment. It proposes introducing a new article 4B to the Defective Premises (Northern Ireland) Order 1975. Article 4B(1) would grant the Department a permissive power to produce regulations that identify particular materials, products, structural design features or any other construction detail that the Department thinks might give rise to actions under article 3 or 4A of the 1975 Order. Article 4B(2) would require the Department to have regard to the building regulations when making such regulations, while articles 4B(3) and 4B(4) would allow for actions to be taken for any reason not listed in the regulations, and that the regulations themselves should not prejudice any other considerations that the courts may wish to apply. It goes on to impose further duties on the Department to produce a report to the Assembly on the content of any such

regulations, while requiring these to be debated by the Assembly before being made.

I recognise the intent of the amendment and the sincerity of those who have brought it, but I cannot support it, for a number of reasons. Primarily, my concern with the idea of such a prescribed list is that it is difficult to determine in advance just what products, materials or design features should be included on such a list. The materials or products may not in themselves be likely to contribute to the dwelling becoming uninhabitable, but rather their inclusion with certain other materials, or the particular way that they are used, may lead to certain future defects. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for officials to predict, even in the abstract, that the use of certain products would result in actions under articles 3 or 4A of the 1975 Order.

Where a material, product or structural design is known to lead to defective premises, there is already a legislative solution in place to restrict or even deny their use, namely, part B, 'Materials and workmanship' of the building regulations. I have them here, in front of me, for the benefit of the House. It says:

"In any relevant work—

(a) the materials used shall—

(i) be of a suitable nature and quality in relation to the purposes for and the conditions in which they are used;

(ii) be adequately mixed and prepared;

(iii) be applied, used or fixed so as adequately to perform the functions for which they are designed; and

(iv) not continue to emit any harmful substance longer than is reasonable in the circumstances."

What we have already in law is what anybody could possibly need in order to make sure that this situation does not come about.

My second concern with the proposed amendment is that it has no legal effect in real terms. This has been backed up by the legal advice that I have received. While it may imply that the inclusion of a product or material on a prescribed list may benefit a claimant's case, it then goes on to state that exclusion from the list does not affect the claimant's chance of success, nor does the prescribed list prevent a court from considering any other matters when considering a claim. Instead, it creates a greater administrative burden on the Department by requiring any regulations that would be produced through the proposed article 4B(5) to be debated in the Assembly before

they can be made and by creating a requirement in article 4B(6) for the Department to produce a report to the Assembly before any regulations are made under this amendment.

So what does the amendment do? It places an administrative and resource burden on the Department. It does not help claimants because it has no legal effect, but it does mandate a list being put together, albeit if a material is not on the list, it does not affect the claimant's chances of success. So the claimant can succeed if the product is listed; equally, the claimant can succeed if the product is not listed. So the question is: what is the point of the list?

Mr McCrossan talked about the need for proper scrutiny. He rightly highlighted the concerns that some Members have in relation to the use of the accelerated passage procedure. However, I can say to the Member that this has gone through the full legislative process in England and Wales. I have engaged with Committee members. My officials have made themselves available to the Committee. I have answered queries from Members, and my officials have engaged with a number of stakeholders, including the Office for Product Safety and Standards; UK Finance; the Royal Society of Ulster Architects; the Communities Committee; the Attorney General for Northern Ireland; the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Departments in other jurisdictions; the Building Safety Regulator; residents and residents' groups; practitioners and industry professionals; the Office of the Legislative Counsel; the Departmental Solicitor's Office; and Ulster Garden Villages.

In addition, I came to the House with a ministerial statement that outlined what I intended to do. Furthermore, we are two years behind England and Wales so we should foresee any potential unintended consequences and have some time to examine those issues. By Mr McCrossan's own admission, he has not even engaged with other members of the Committee. I recognise that we are using an accelerated process today, but we have engaged.

The legal advice that I have received is clear: the amendment does absolutely nothing. It has no legal effect. All it does is place an administrative burden on the Department. The purpose of any Bill must be to change the law. The proposed amendment does not make any legal change to the Bill that would benefit either party to a claim. For that reason, together with those that I outlined earlier, I cannot give it my support, and no other party should, either.

Mr Speaker: I call Daniel McCrossan to wind.
[Pause.] It is Mark Durkan to wind.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. You can do it if you want, Daniel.

I welcome the opportunity to speak today on our proposed sensible and sensitive amendment to an important piece of legislation that will afford more protections to homeowners and occupiers. The majority of Members who have spoken have outlined the suboptimal nature of accelerated passage, including the Minister. It is certainly less than satisfactory. It reminds one of the old adage: legislate in haste, repent at leisure. The aim of our amendment is to make sure that we have nothing to repent. I wonder whether the DUP will repent for the two years that it left us without an Assembly and Executive, and left people without the protections that the legislation will, hopefully, afford them.

Mr Lyons: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Yes.

Mr Lyons: The Member is doing exactly what Daniel McCrossan did earlier; he is deflecting because there is no substance to the arguments. I ask the Member a question that is simple for anybody who has taken the time to understand what is in front of us today: what is the Member proposing in his amendment that is not already covered by the building regulations that I read out earlier?

Mr Durkan: The amendment — I will come to this in detail in the body of my speech — as my colleague outlined, provides other options and routes to recourse for those affected. As was outlined by Mr McCrossan, there is a significant disparity between the North and England and Wales in the limitation periods for legal action regarding defective buildings. That disparity leaves homeowners here at a significant disadvantage, unable to seek timely access to justice and compensation, the impact of which, as we have heard today, has had devastating consequences for so many families across this island.

Aligning our limitation periods is not only fair but essential to protect the rights of homeowners in the North and to ensure equitable treatment across jurisdictions. It is important that we get this right, and that we future-proof it, so that more people will not be left high and dry, like so many thousands of families in the South and, of late, so many apartment owners in south Belfast. Our amendment future-proofs existing

legislation by offering legal protections for a situation that not only has plagued our neighbours in the South of Ireland but is now rearing its ugly head here in the North. The unfolding disaster of defective building materials is already here, and it is, sadly and scarily, inevitable that the situation will become more pronounced in the time ahead.

We need to address the matter now. The Executive mindset has been, "Why should we do something today that can be put off to next year, the year after or the year after that?". I am shocked but not surprised that other parties are putting all their eggs into the "We'll bring another Bill in the future" basket. How many times were we caught with that one in the last mandate, which has led to less than satisfactory legislation on private tenancies, gambling and even licensing?

3.00 pm

I have been contacted by several constituents directly impacted by the issue. To date, their cries to government have fallen on deaf ears. Homeowners across the border in Donegal, Mayo and Limerick, closer to home and, indeed, at home — I am aware of cases in Derry — have seen their lives upended by the use of substandard materials in the building of their homes. They face unimaginable stress, financial ruin and the loss of their most valuable asset, namely their children's home. All the while, the walls of what should be their sanctuary are crumbling around them. Despite what the Minister might think or wish, we are not talking about a faraway land; the cases are a stone's throw from my constituency. All of us will have constituents who own holiday homes in the South and have been cruelly excluded from any redress. I appeal to the Minister to raise the issue at the NSMC and to ensure that his legislation excludes no one on the basis of their permanent residence.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for giving way. He will understand that there are certain things that are within my control and certain things that are not. I recognise the problems that many people in Donegal in particular have faced. Will the Member explain — I come at this sincerely and genuinely — what his amendment would do that is not already covered in the building regulations that I set out? That is the key point, and I would love to know his perspective on that. What does his amendment do that is not already done in the building regs?

Mr Durkan: It will remove ambiguity. I have to ask the Minister this: what do the existing regs

or legislation do when people whose properties have been affected by mica and other defective materials have come to his Department and the Department of Finance and not got any answers, not even, "Oh, sorry, your building is seven years old, so you are outside the six years". They have just been told, "This is nothing to do with us". The legislation before us will extend the validity of the existing provisions, but excuse me for thinking that it might not do the job that the Minister thinks it will.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for giving way. On that point, to my knowledge seven cases have been identified by Derry City and Strabane District Council: six social homes that have received redress and one private home that, I think, was not eligible for redress because of when it was built. Those are the only cases that have come forward, but I go back to the main point: what would your amendment achieve? You asked how many cases have come forward to me: it is a very small number, and redress has been given to the houses affected. That was done through what is in the building regs, so I ask again: what do you add through your amendment?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister — well, I am not sure that I do thank him — for that latest intervention. The number of cases to date — seven — is small, but it is the tip of a potentially large iceberg. I am not sure what redress those cases have received. There are other cases, and Mr McCrossan has written on behalf of constituents to various Departments. I am not blaming the Minister or even necessarily his Department for this, but those people have not been told what protections exist in legislation for them. The Minister confirmed to me earlier that there were six social housing properties in Derry that the Department was aware of as early as 2018. That begs the question as to why action was not taken at that point and why, in 2021, the then Minister for the same Department denied any knowledge or responsibility and advised that the issue had not been identified north of the border. There are and have been inconsistencies in the Department on the issue.

Also in 2022, the Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, denied that it had anything to do with him. When asked about his engagement with the Irish Government on the matter, he said that his Department did not have policy responsibility for housing. We already knew that, and therefore those conversations did not happen. However, his response suggested that Minister Harghey at DFC held that responsibility and chose not to intervene.

That was particularly hypocritical given that, at that time, Minister Harghey's party, Sinn Féin, was rightly demanding 100% redress for those impacted in the South and decrying their abandonment by their Government while people here were denied the opportunity even to be heard. Instead, the door was slammed shut in their face. Through our amendment, we want to ensure that they can at least have a foot in the door and that that cannot happen again. I appreciate the Minister accepting his Department's responsibility for some elements of this because, to date, there has very much been a "Nothing to do with me" approach.

We have spoken about Derry City and Strabane District Council's initiative to establish a register of defective premises. If there are only seven on that register, I fear that it will grow. On 6 January, when the council's director of environment and regeneration wrote to the Department's permanent secretary regarding defective mica blocks, officials responded in the same month to advise that the issue pertaining to defective mica blocks was a reserved matter and was not within the Department's responsibility. I am not sure how they received redress when, at the same time, the Department was denying any responsibility and saying that it was a reserved matter.

That is why we need the amendment. It would put it in statute with no ifs, buts or shadows for anyone to hide in that there is protection for people. There has been no further correspondence with the council since then, as far as I can establish. I would like the Minister to commit to his Department re-engaging with the council on the issue and to assure it that existing legislation will cover any one landlord or property owner who comes forward in the future.

Mr Lyons: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Yes.

Mr Lyons: The Member has been generous about interventions, and I appreciate that. I am trying to bring clarity to the debate. Certainly, the Department stands ready to help with explanation of any of the current legislation. The legislation that we have provides opportunities for homeowners to seek redress from any party, including material providers, that has contributed to the construction of or carrying out of major work on a dwelling that is subsequently deemed to be uninhabitable due to poor workmanship or poor building materials.

I am sure that my officials will have no issue in engaging with the council or, indeed, with anybody else on those issues to explain the legislation and the opportunities for redress that exist. I am confident that what we have in the building regulations right now covers all the issues that the Member has described. The materials used should be of a suitable nature and quality for the purposes for which and the conditions in which they are used. That should cover it.

Mr Durkan: I appreciate the Minister's offer of his Department advising me, I suppose, the council and, most importantly, people who may be affected of the content of existing legislation. However, that will possibly have come too late for some, given that, only a short time ago, the Department was saying that the matter was nothing to do with it and that it was a reserved matter.

I am disappointed that Executive parties oppose the amendment. Some Members, including the Minister, say that there is no need for the amendment and that existing legislation affords the requisite protections. If that is the case, why, as I said, has nobody who has been similarly affected been able to get any answers to date or even been told that they do not qualify on the grounds of falling outwith the prescribed time frame? Others oppose it because of the risk that it might do too much and have unintended consequences, as Ms Mulholland said. I would hate to think that it is a case of Executive parties circling the wagons and voting against our amendment on the basis that it has been tabled by the Opposition, because that really seems like opposition for opposition's sake.

Mr Allen: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Sorry, Andy, I will come to you in a minute.

We cannot sleepwalk into a situation similar to that in the South. We will not be forgiven for it, and we will not forgive ourselves for it.

Mr Allen: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member will appreciate, given his former role on the Communities Committee, that we have always worked together constructively. However, as the Minister has asked on several occasions and as I asked in my speech, what difference will the SDLP amendment make? I know that the Member has cited ambiguity, but it is already covered by the current legislation. I am not convinced. If the party opposite had engaged with Members to convince us of the

merits of the amendment beyond what the Minister cited, we may have been able to take a different approach.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his intervention. As I have stated again and again, there are people whom the current legislation has not helped. Until now, the Department seemed unaware of the legislation and the protections in it. Our lack of engagement has been due to time, because this has happened in a truncated fashion. I regret the fact that we have not been able to have that engagement and form a consensus on the issue, but it needs to be done because, believe me, in the future, there will be consensus on the issue and there will be regret that what needs done was not done now.

We must not lose sight of our responsibility to our constituents. In our view, the amendment is not just a legal necessity; it is a moral imperative. Again, I ask — one last roll of the dice — for your support, and I hope that the Bill can help restore the public's faith in our building standards and regulatory systems. We must make sure that this is a strong Defective Premises Bill rather than weak, defective legislation that will leave more people exposed to huge expense, anxiety and unimaginable upheaval.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 27; Noes 38.

AYES

Dr Archibald, Mr Baker, Miss Brogan, Mr Delargy, Mrs Dillon, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Miss Hargey, Ms Hunter, Ms Kimmins, Mr McAleer, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mrs Mason, Ms Á Murphy, Mr C Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Toole, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Durkan and Mr McCrossan

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Beattie, Mr Blair, Mr Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dodds, Mr Donnelly, Mr Dunne, Ms Eastwood, Ms Egan, Mr Elliott, Mrs Erskine, Mr

Frew, Mr Harvey, Mr Honeyford, Mr Irwin, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Mr McMurray, Mr McReynolds, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Nicholl, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Brooks and Mr Kingston

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Defective Premises Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker. I remind Members that the deadline for tabling amendments for the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is 9.30 am tomorrow, Wednesday 12 June. Members, please take your ease before we move to the next item of business.

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

Private Members' Business

Energy Market

Mr Honeyford: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the cost-of-living crisis is exacerbated by the cost of energy; further recognises that this constitutes the direct cost of a reliance on fossil fuels in an increasingly unstable world; endorses the concept of energy transition proofing for all public policy and legislation, including development rights for green infrastructure; acknowledges the value of constructing and retrofitting houses and offices, prioritising renewable energy sources; and calls on the Minister for the Economy urgently to introduce the necessary legislation emerging from the current energy strategy, including to alter the terms of the Utility Regulator to incorporate oil within its role and to carry out its functions with due regard to the need to meet net zero targets.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. As 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. David, please open the debate on the motion.

Mr Honeyford: In proposing the motion, I tell you what: I accept the SDLP amendment. You would almost think that it had been copied and pasted from Hansard. I have already said every word that is in the amendment in the Chamber, so I am happy to support it, and I am even more delighted that the SDLP listened to what I said. I welcome the Minister back to office, which I have not had a chance to do yet. I wish him well into the future.

3.30 pm

Alliance is delighted to bring forward this motion, which reaches to the heart of providing solutions to help to reduce energy spend from household budgets and seeks to prevent a situation in which the recent massive increase in energy costs could ever happen again. Energy is central to all our lives: it is the cost of heating our homes, of boiling the kettle and of

putting fuel in our cars. We live in an exciting time of opportunity, transition and change. At this time, we must position ourselves to take full advantage of that and deliver the benefits directly to every household.

Addressing this issue continues to require an all-island approach. We live on an island in the Atlantic Ocean. We have all the natural resources at our disposal, so we must tackle the climate emergency and protect our environment, not only for ourselves but for future generations. We must create the circumstances to enable us to quickly move away from reliance on fossil fuels. Unfortunately, the pace of transition is stalling. Alliance tabled the motion in order to bring attention to that and to provide solutions to help to bring us back on track and deliver secure, cleaner, fairer, safer and cheaper energy for every household. Alliance believes in that, and we will continue to strive to become an ambitious world leader in energy efficiency and clean, net zero technologies, creating new highly skilled jobs locally.

With technology advancing quickly, we must seek to develop our capacity to the point that we can export surplus electricity as well as investing in the progressive technologies of biogas and hydrogen. Waiting or stalling are simply not options. Any delay to developing and constructing our major infrastructure builds on a financial problem that will end up costing every one of us in the long term. The Alliance Party will not stand back while the public sleepwalk into further and higher costs. As energy comes under my role as economy spokesperson, I raised this matter early in the term and am committed to working to try to eliminate and eradicate fuel poverty. Alliance believes that that is the energy target that we must work towards delivering.

Insulating our homes and upgrading them to be airtight would reduce the amount of warm air that leaks out and drafts of colder air that come in. Fitting smart meters is another measure that we can easily introduce into all our homes. Those are measures that we can and should help with, and they will drastically reduce the amount of energy that is needed to heat homes in the first place and protect the most vulnerable. A new fuel poverty strategy would ensure targeted delivery for those who are most in need, making sure that they are supported first. Alliance proposes that we start with those homes. Homeowners in our constituencies also need our support to transform their home heating from oil to a more sustainable energy method, be that biogas, heat pumps or solar panels.

The initial capital outlay to upgrade a property is a major barrier that the Assembly can help with through a mixture of grants and interest-free loans to allow delivery. A cost-neutral facility such as interest-free loans would enable people to spread the cost over several years and thus to see the savings as they use less energy. By helping families to better insulate their homes and providing grants to help to upgrade our social housing stock much faster, we would drive down the cost to our constituents by reducing the volume of energy used to heat homes in the first place, while we also work to address energy transformation away from fossil fuels.

This is an issue for all Departments. I stress that every Department must be accountable for meeting net zero targets and facilitating the transition to renewable energy. Offshore wind, onshore wind, solar, biogas and hydrogen are all areas in which we must invest now, in order to create the conditions for those technologies and industries to flourish and create new, green jobs. I stress this point in the Chamber, again: our green industry continues to be held back by an outdated and under-resourced planning process. Reforming our current planning process must be an absolute priority if we are to deliver.

I have said before in the Chamber that every business should make a profit, but the other side of profit is taxation: we should redistribute wealth to support low and low-to-middle earners. Alliance wants to build a region where everyone thrives — a united community in which no one is left behind. We cannot sit back when ordinary people on ordinary incomes are hurting while oil and gas companies continue to make hugely exaggerated profits that go to a few. There must be a rebalancing. Taxation is a Westminster issue, but I stress again that, for Alliance, taxation must be progressive and must redistribute wealth fairly to protect our most vulnerable.

With 70% of households currently reliant on home heating oil, we must help local families and households to deal with the price of oil. Alliance therefore calls for the regulator to be given control over costs, placing home heating oil within the remit of the Utility Regulator to bring the market in line with gas and electricity to ensure price transparency for our consumers. Alliance also calls for a change to the Utility Regulator's functions to include meeting net zero targets. That will help to protect consumers through energy transition and drive down the cost of energy into the future. From speaking to energy specialists, we must start the process of building our main

electricity infrastructure now to allow for the expansion and connection of solar and wind energy across Northern Ireland. The days of our network being based on three power stations are over; the planning and building of our new electricity infrastructure must happen now. The regulator has a key role to play, and the net zero targets must be added to its functions if we are serious. We must develop the network over the next decade rather than leaving a huge void and building up a huge cost in the future. The problem is in front of our eyes. The Assembly should act now to prevent playing catch-up in the future.

Be in no doubt: Alliance will always stand up for ordinary people and, equally, for the planet and our local environment. Alliance calls for action against climate change and is tabling the motion to set out and reinforce a delivery path to net zero in order to deliver a green new deal, support green new industries and create highly skilled new jobs. Importantly, and central to those objectives, Alliance will also stand up for our constituents from every background and every social group. Alliance will always stand up for equality and justice for the better.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Sinéad McLaughlin to move the amendment.

Ms McLaughlin: I beg to move the following amendment:

At end insert:

‘; and further calls on the Minister to work with the Minister for Communities to agree a large-scale social housing retrofit programme to reduce domestic fossil fuel consumption and increase energy efficiency, starting with communities in highest disadvantage, and to make a statement to the Assembly on the progress of this programme within six months.’

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Sinéad, you 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 are called to speak will have five minutes. Sinéad, please open the debate on the amendment.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I welcome the motion and thank those who tabled it. It provides an important opportunity in the Assembly to discuss one of the most pressing aspects of the Minister's economic strategy, namely our energy policy. There can be no doubt that we must take advantage of the huge opportunities

in our energy market across this island. It is a crucial part of our economic potential and a vital piece of the jigsaw in combating the climate emergency. In particular, I welcome the motion's focus on the regulation of oil. The motion is right to call attention to the interdependent relationship of the cost-of-living crisis and the cost of energy. More than two thirds of people here use home heating oil. I wholeheartedly agree that the transition to net zero means that, in future, hopefully, oil will be phased out altogether. The reality, however, is that many thousands of people in Northern Ireland still use it, and it must be regulated.

Regardless of the benefits of any fossil fuel regulation or, indeed, the transition to renewables, if homes are not made to be energy-efficient, we will never make the progress that we need to make in bringing down costs to consumers. As has been said many times, the cheapest form of energy is the one that you do not use at all. Simply put, if heat is leaving through the windows and doors of our houses because of energy inefficiency, we can never expect success from the energy strategy. I have visited constituents who are simply pumping money into an inefficient property through no fault of their own. Our amendment is therefore intended to place the retrofitting agenda at the front and centre of our discussions on the energy market, where it belongs. We have championed that cause repeatedly at councils, in the Assembly and at Westminster, where my colleague Claire Hanna MP has worked as part of the all-party group on the green new deal to bring forward proposals and support legislation to create a universal basic energy allowance and a retrofitting strategy.

That cause, however, has been significantly undermined by the Conservative Government's actions at Westminster. The Tories cut energy efficiency programmes way back in 2013, and, 10 years later, those programmes stood at a figure that was 10 times lower than that of 2010. In its plans to form the Government, the British Labour Party stated that it would give devolved Governments and local authorities powers and resources to upgrade cold and draughty homes in their areas. In Westminster, the SDLP's MPs intend to hold the next Government to account on that pledge. In addition to the work at Westminster, we can take some crucial steps in the Assembly, which include the Minister for the Economy working with the Minister for Communities to agree a large-scale social housing retrofit programme in order to reduce domestic fossil fuel consumption and increase energy efficiency,

starting with communities that are in the areas of highest disadvantage.

We all know that retrofitting makes sense. It makes sense for the environment and for reaching our net zero targets, especially given that we need to deliver energy savings of 25% from buildings and industry and that 27% of our emissions come from domestic sources. SSE called for a framework to be put in place to foster the development of a deep retrofit market in Northern Ireland, including a public body with responsibility for running retrofit schemes. SSE also stated that achieving the higher energy efficiency band across building stock would amount to energy savings of up to £700 per household and reduce each household's carbon output by 3.7 tons. It also makes sense for our economy, since the ambition to retrofit our homes will drive innovation and a new generation of green jobs with increased demand for technical skills that can align with such a programme. Those skills will primarily be found in our further education colleges, representing a significant opportunity for that sector. We also cannot overestimate the health benefits of such a retrofit programme. Our cold draughty homes drive illness and chronic pain across all our communities. I have come across more people than I care to who have bronchitis or are suffering from asthma because of the mould in their home. Our health service cannot cope with that, and it can least afford that demand on it at this time.

In May 2023, the Forum for a Better Housing Market published research that found that Northern Ireland lags behind other regions in decarbonisation. That was found to be partly because a lacklustre approach has been permitted to be fostered, thanks to a fragmented policy landscape with a lack of agreed targets and associated milestones. The progress on that has also been frustrated by the constant instability of government here. In 2020, a report was produced to inform the evidence base of the energy strategy. It found that we need to drive the retrofitting of more than 50,000 buildings per year in Northern Ireland, which was more than treble the rate at the time, and that a dramatic change in policy extent and funding levels is required.

I welcome hearing from the Minister that departmental officials are preparing a public consultation on the low-carbon heat support scheme in line with action 8 of the energy strategy action plan. It is also good to hear recently from the Minister about a consultation on evidence-based options for a domestic energy efficiency programme in line with action 7 of the same action plan. Many people were

rightly concerned by the closure of the boiler replacement scheme last September due to budgetary constraints. I hope that it goes without saying that new schemes must be targeted at disadvantaged areas.

In response to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's inquiry into renewable energy and net zero, Queen's University Belfast has said that concentrating home retrofitting in those areas with the lowest incomes initially can help to tackle fuel poverty, reduce emissions, produce positive health outcomes and offer new forms of social and economic regeneration.

If we are to reach our net zero targets, however, we need to take really bold steps, including some on a cross-departmental basis, particularly given the Department for Communities' lead on the residential building section of the climate action plan (CAP). We need to step up and lean into the retrofitting agenda without delay and end the lack of urgency that has characterised the issue.

3.45 pm

The proposal is ambitious by its nature, but ambition is sorely needed. We have the least energy-efficient homes of any country in western Europe. I will say that again: we have the least energy-efficient homes of any country in western Europe. Houses here lose heat up to three times faster than those of our neighbours. Changing that in the North will require us to look at our regulations and the housing that we invest in. We all heard the worrying evidence last week that the Budget will allow for just 400 new homes to be built, half the number that the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations views as the worst-case scenario. We are building nowhere near the number of homes that we need, and the homes that we are building are not fit for purpose from an energy-efficiency standpoint. We support the call from the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations for a ring-fenced section of the Westminster social housing decarbonisation fund of £3.8 billion to help to deliver that transition. The federation has been clear that it is a fundamental requirement of the Executive to develop a plan to improve energy efficiency, including through funding areas that can demonstrate need.

I acknowledge that social housing can be only the start of our efforts. While 79% of social housing has an energy-efficiency rating between A and C, only 43% of private-rental dwellings share such a rating. We cannot limit our ambition to social housing. We need to

consider how to retrofit our schools, hospitals and other public buildings. We can start with our social housing, and we can start now. By working together across the Chamber, we can deliver change, make progress on energy efficiency and bring costs down for our consumers — our constituents.

Mr Brett (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I pay tribute to my Committee colleagues for tabling the motion and to Ms McLaughlin for proposing her amendment. We will support both.

The Committee has considered a number of the issues to be discussed this afternoon, and we are likely to discuss more of them as the Committee's attention turns to energy matters including climate change and our just transition. In that regard, the Committee strongly and unanimously felt that the most vulnerable consumers should be at the centre of consideration by the Minister and the House, as part of that important transition work.

The motion refers specifically to the role of the Utility Regulator, which the Committee has discussed on numerous occasions. The Committee unanimously felt that, when compared with its equivalent organisation — Ofgem — our Utility Regulator appears to lack the essential vires to effectively support transition while ensuring consumer protection and protecting security of supply. I know that the Minister will introduce legislation on that matter.

Members clearly indicated that it was entirely reasonable for the Utility Regulator's legal powers to be enhanced in order to allow it to usefully regulate consumer redress and provide an alternative energy dispute resolution channel, as the Energy Ombudsman does in the rest of the United Kingdom. Legal powers could also be extended to include the regulation of local community benefits from renewable energy developments, hydrogen heat networks and, crucially, the home heating market.

As the Minister will be aware, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has suggested that specific consideration be given to so-called off-grid consumers and household users of home heating oil in order to address the lack of consumer protection that those people face. The CMA argued to the Committee that there is a strong case that such consumers would benefit from similar regulatory protections to those covering on-grid households and that the Department could therefore bring some of those provisions within the scope of regulations in Northern Ireland. I submitted a question for

written answer to Minister Hargey, when she was in post, on whether the Department had any plans to regulate that sector. The then Minister said that the Department was not exploring that option, but perhaps Minister Murphy could clarify whether the Department intends to look at that matter.

In respect of heat networks, the CMA contends that Northern Ireland consumers should be given protection comparable to that of consumers of gas and electricity. The organisation has called for the sector regulator to be given formal powers to introduce regulation and to monitor and enforce compliance. It is therefore hoped that, when the Department launches its anticipated consultation on heat networks, it will include consideration of those matters.

Finally, the Committee was briefed on the Utility Regulator (support for decarbonisation preparation) Bill, and members noted with some surprise that the Bill dealt only with interactions between the Economy Department and the Utility Regulator. The Committee was further surprised to learn that the Economy Department had no plans at that time to include provisions dealing with other Departments. The officials assured us that it was up to those Departments. I am sure that the Minister can give us an assurance that his Department will work with Executive colleagues to ensure that the Utility Regulator has the support that it needs from all Departments. The Utility Regulator is clearly critical to the delivery of a regulated and fair energy transition, and extra legal powers are certainly needed. The Committee is ready to scrutinise and support the Minister constructively as he brings forward his legislation.

Speaking as an MLA for North Belfast, I am keen to hear more from the Minister about his ongoing work on green jobs. The Minister has, on a number of occasions, given a commitment to the House that the focus of the enhanced investment zone in Northern Ireland will be on that very factor. The Minister is working hard with his critical friends to progress those matters. I am keen to get an update on the issue, if the Minister has time.

I will follow up on some of the remarks made by Ms McLaughlin. The retrofitting of homes across my constituency of North Belfast is a major issue. Those of us who are privileged to represent North Belfast will know of the fuel poverty inflicted on our constituents. The retrofitting schemes that have taken place have made a huge difference to the most vulnerable and those on the lowest incomes. For me, the

private rental sector still has a long way to go. We have families who are forced to pay huge rents but do not want to raise the issue of energy efficiency in case they are evicted by the landlord.

I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr McGuigan: Following on from the Chair of the Committee, I think that it is important to say that the members of the Economy Committee have had a good working relationship, as is reflected in the numerous motions that we have debated in the Chamber that were within the Economy Minister's remit and focus. There has been broad consensus, and I do not expect that to differ today. I thank the Alliance Members for tabling the motion, which is on an important subject that is worthy of discussion.

Undoubtedly, the significant increase in the cost of energy has had an adverse impact on many households and businesses and deepened the cost-of-living crisis. While there have been global factors at play, our over-reliance on fossil fuels has made the North particularly vulnerable to price rises and put us at the mercy of major corporations. Those corporations, while claiming that market volatility meant that they had to cover their increasing costs, have managed, year-on-year, to make record profits while families struggled to heat their homes, fill their cars and keep the lights on.

Short-term interventions, such as the energy support payments, which were necessary, are not sustainable in the long term. As we look to address growing fuel poverty, with the ultimate ambition of its eradication and meeting the targets in the Climate Change Act and the path to net zero energy strategy, it is clear that we need to progress at pace towards clean, renewable and affordable sources of energy. That will not only assist us to protect and improve our environment but provide us with reliable and sustainable energy. It will also allow us to strive for energy independence, which is particularly important, taking power out of the hands of the profiteering corporations and putting it into the hands of ordinary people, potentially through initiatives such as community energy projects, co-ops and microgeneration. Additionally, a wealth of opportunities can be found, as others have said, in the green energy sector, and, with proper investment, some of the recognised challenges can be addressed, such as planning, storage and capacity. On this island, we have the potential to become leaders in the field. We are known for our innovative engineering and manufacturing capabilities, and we need to harness and maximise the benefits

for the environment, our citizens and the economy.

The transition to renewable power must be a just one, however. Workers in energy-intensive industries must be protected through initiatives such as upskilling and retraining. Lower-income families must not be penalised. The public should be encouraged and, through grants and other schemes, supported when it comes to adopting such schemes. Ultimately, the cost of moving towards renewable energy sources should fall not on the shoulders of ordinary people but on the industries and companies that use the majority of energy here.

The motion's ambitions to achieve net zero and energy security go beyond the remit of the Economy Minister. Others have clearly indicated that, and I know from discussions in Committee that we need to look at the planning process and at how it can be adapted to assist with those ambitions. The motion also references the Utility Regulator, which certainly has a key role to play in ensuring that the transition to net zero is a just one. If we can increase the scoping powers to allow it to do that, we should do so.

The amendment calls for:

"a large-scale social housing retrofit programme to reduce domestic fossil fuel consumption and increase energy efficiency",

which would clearly be beneficial, although the short timeline, such as the six-month deadline included in the amendment, could mean rushed, high-level proposals rather than costed, achievable solutions. On the whole, however, we are content to support the overall principles of the motion and the amendment.

Dr Aiken: The Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion and the amendment.

The climate emergency is an accelerating problem, and it is not just to do with the environment, as we have seen recently with high temperatures and high seawater temperatures and the impact that both are having on our climate as we speak. It is also about what is happening internationally: what is going on in Russia and its attacks on the Ukraine; and what is happening in the Middle East as a result of destabilisation and attacks by Iran. It is about the implications that those situations are likely to have on the supply of energy, not just across the world but in Northern Ireland. As has been said on several occasions, Northern Ireland is particularly

susceptible to problems with fuel oil and its uses, particularly for heating.

One of the major things that we need to look at as we move towards a just transition and rapidly towards net zero carbon — something that we have to do — is to make sure that we deal with the potential problems of fuel poverty. Some think about how they will manage themselves out of this problem. They talk about solutions that include heat pumps, photovoltaic (PV) panels and extra insulation. Some will find those easier to do than others, but a lot of the housing stock across Northern Ireland needs to be retrofitted. There needs to be support in order to do that, because, if there is not, we will never achieve it. The return on such investment may, in some cases, take 10, 20 or 30 years to materialise, and we need to make sure that our most vulnerable are not left out.

We have to be aware of other significant issues, such as what is going on in the energy market in Northern Ireland. We have talked about the Utility Regulator, which has a vital role to play. As I have mentioned on numerous occasions, one of the biggest problems that we have is a near-monopoly that has been supported by EirGrid and the Electricity Supply Board (ESB), aka the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI) and Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE). A lot of the things that they have been doing in the market have been, to be frank, uncompetitive, forcing many in the renewable energy sector to move out of Northern Ireland and not invest here. It is not just a planning issue but about grid connection and how that is managed.

On many occasions, we have heard stories about onshore wind. One of the big issues with offshore wind providers — this is the reason that we do not have offshore wind in Northern Ireland — is that the likes of SONI and NIE would not let them connect to the grid when that was first proposed nearly a decade ago. Here we are, a decade on, in a situation in which we are not able to benefit from offshore wind. There has to be substantial change, and the Utility Regulator has an important job to do.

As has been said, however, it is not just an all-island issue but an all-islands one.

Ofgem has an important role. It has managed to transform the GB market. Scotland and Wales come under Ofgem. There are many things that the industry is doing here right now that we should be doing here and, indeed, across all these islands. Our Utility Regulator and our regulations need to ensure that we are adaptive to what is happening in GB. It is vital, through

interconnection, that we have that link to Ofgem. The links that we have with the rest of this island are also vital, but it is not going to work unless we build a North/South interconnector. That needs to be moved on at pace.

4.00 pm

Minister, I have mentioned before that we need to consider reviewing the integrated single electricity market (ISEM). Is it fit for purpose? Will it be able to deliver for the people in Northern Ireland and get us to where we need to be when it comes to our goal of net zero carbon? The climate emergency is getting worse. We have gone beyond the time of sitting and talking about it. We need to engage and get moving now. We have had the warnings: it is warming up. We are not in a position to hold back any further. The changes that we need to make need to be made now. We cannot sit around and wait any longer.

As I said, we will support the motion and the amendment.

Miss Brogan: As Sinn Féin spokesperson for climate and the environment, I am happy to speak here today in support of the motion. Whilst the move to net zero will, no doubt, bring challenges, we should be aware of the very many opportunities that it will also bring. The shift to renewables brings enormous potential in energy security, stability and independence. The development of the green economy here is an exciting environmental and economic prospect. In addition to creating good jobs and generating income and investment, it will play a huge role in helping us to meet our climate targets.

There are further advantages to moving to renewables. Reducing our reliance on fossil fuels will massively improve our air quality. That is an issue that currently leads to around 1,700 deaths across Ireland every year. Cleaner air and water will help us to restore our ecosystem and halt the biodiversity crisis that we are experiencing. That crisis is linked to climate change, drops in food production and increases in infectious diseases, pests and pathogens. Transitioning away from fossil fuels and towards renewables will give us a fighting chance of keeping global warming below the 1.5°C threshold. That threshold represents the tipping point at which certain aspects of climate change become irreversible and we condemn not only our children and grandchildren but their children and grandchildren to dealing with those. It is crucial for not only us but those

future generations that we embrace the transition to net zero. However, it must be a just transition. Livelihoods must be protected, rural communities must not be vilified, lower-income families must not be left behind, and the bulk of the burden for the change must not fall on the backs of ordinary workers and families. Protections, supports, incentives and grants must be put in place to ensure that people not only are capable of making the changes necessary to reach net zero but can benefit from the environmental and economic advantages that it provides.

The task that we face is enormous, but we should not lose sight of the incredible gains and opportunities that are available to us if we can rise to it. I am happy to support the motion here today.

Ms Eastwood: I echo what my colleague David Honeyford said so well and what many Members right across the House have said during the course of the debate: we find ourselves at a moment in time when the goal of net zero is, unfortunately, being undermined by some. However, I am proud to have put my name to this motion, especially now.

I understand that terms such as "green energy", "net zero" and "just transition" can, at times, be wide-ranging, and that people find it difficult to feel that they resonate with them. Therefore, it is essential that, as we push for the transition to renewable sources of energy, including the retrofitting of our housing, we discuss more openly why we are doing it. What we are really talking about is lower energy bills, ending fuel poverty, and making homes warmer and more comfortable for people. So many Members have mentioned their constituents who are struggling in homes that are inadequate at the moment. I am thinking of the people who are going in to the likes of B&M and constantly buying wee dehumidifiers and wee things to sit on their windowsill because they have water or condensation running through the inside of their homes, and it is making their clothes smell and their children ill. However, we have an opportunity before us today. We are talking about job opportunities, cleaner air and, of course, climate change. However, we cannot allow people, businesses and organisations to, again, be exposed to the price increases that we have suffered because of conflict or crises. Indeed, Mr Aiken referred to the many and varied geopolitical crises that are having an impact on prices.

I fully accept that achieving a transition to renewable energy and reaching net zero will take a huge amount of investment, but we

simply cannot afford not to do it. In the midst of the incredibly difficult financial position that we find ourselves in, and with all the challenges that we face, from healthcare to education, what the public want most from us is to know that things will get better. A key element of that is doubling down on our ambitions to transform our energy sources. That can offer new and secure jobs, opportunities to gain new skills, warmer homes, lower bills and cleaner air.

Achieving those ambitious goals means front-loading as much work as possible. We need to give ourselves the best chance of reaching net zero by 2050, and the next five to 10 years will be crucial in achieving that. The Climate Change Committee has outlined just how difficult that is going to be. For example, by 2030, for homes that are off the gas grid, all new heating appliance installations should be zero carbon. For homes that are on the gas grid, it is 2033. As we know, that will have huge implications for our electricity networks, and we have spoken about the importance of planning in that area. Industry will also need to reduce fossil fuel use by 45% by 2030, which will require huge efforts to switch to low-carbon energy.

Underpinning the actions that we need to take are policy decisions. Our motion touches on a number of the key ones, which my colleagues will focus on, such as planning reform, which others have mentioned; cross-departmental working; and the role of the Utility Regulator, which has been mentioned by most people. I will focus on something that is not explicitly mentioned in the motion but is fundamental to all that we are discussing — people and skills. My colleagues on the Economy Committee know that I sound like a broken record on that issue, but improving our skills policy is key because we can have all the plans that we want, but unless we make sure that there are people to do the jobs, they will not happen.

Now is the time for a complete step change and an urgency that is currently lacking. Whilst I acknowledge that the Minister has outlined some plans, much greater clarity on actions and timelines is needed, as that is how we can all measure success and hold the responsible Departments to account. For example, we need to understand what reforms to our education sector will take place in light of the 14-19 strategy, the independent review of education and the research into our FE delivery, which, as Ms McLaughlin mentioned, plays a crucial role. I am glad to see that the green energy skills industry reference group is in place and am delighted that it will deliver an action plan, but that should be brought forward and fully costed.

We need much greater ambition in the promotion of apprenticeships, something that I am very passionate about, and the number of people choosing that training route. Indeed, I was delighted to recently visit Northern Ireland Electricity Networks' training facility in Lurgan and get an overview of its training. The people training were of all different ages and backgrounds and were clearly incredibly capable and fully aware that the careers that they were undertaking would be of huge importance to our community.

The motion is about placing the focus of the Assembly back on one of the absolutely essential policy and legislative areas for the mandate. If we are to achieve our targets, now is the time to start. I encourage everybody to fully get behind this.

Mr McMurray: Green energy production is a key Alliance policy, and it is one that I am driven to speak on in the Chamber and will seek to progress during my time in the Assembly. Energy is central to all our lives — that is a given — but, as obvious as it seems, we cannot rely on a finite resource to supply our energy needs into the future. We need sustainable forms of energy, not just for ourselves but for our children, our environment and our planet. To do that, we must remove ourselves from the old fossil-fuel based ways of energy production.

Northern Ireland can and should be an ambitious world leader in energy efficient, clean and net zero technologies. Indeed, as one economist put it, what Saudi Arabia is to oil production, Ireland has the potential to be to offshore wind energy production. We are an island nation, and we have many industries that are built upon engineering and getting to sea. We are also adept at developing and maintaining industries that are based at sea. We need to see a focus from the Assembly to assist us in that regard. By working alongside established industries and further and higher education institutions, there will not just be a reduction of emissions, which will be of benefit, but an upskilling of our workforce and development of our economy. I thank my colleague for highlighting that.

Unfortunately, we also have to deal with the legacy of a failed renewable energy scheme that has seen, albeit understandably, institutional reticence to support new schemes focused on renewable energies. While I accept that there is an element of renewables being developed because it is the right thing to do, the brass tacks of it are that financial incentives are needed in order to expedite the development of

renewable energies. Quite simply, the costs are prohibitive to many who want to make that change.

I appreciate that the Minister for the Economy is in the Chamber. Ultimately, there has to be empowerment at the front of this. I appreciate the statement that the Minister has put on record and the work that officials in his Department have already put in. However, it requires action and direction, which a strategy will provide. As with so many issues, though, that requires cross-departmental thinking and actions if we are to see demonstrable solutions and changes in the sector.

All Departments should be accountable for meeting net zero targets and facilitating the transition to renewable energy. That requires focus and direction. As such, it should be a central function within the Executive to ensure that each Department is meeting required targets. That will require a governance framework to be put in place. It is not just Departments that need to work together. The planners, energy producers and network operators need to be working together on this. These are large issues that affect the whole of Northern Ireland and will require a desire and strategic approach from the Assembly.

Points have been made, all of which I concur with, but I just want to put into practical terms how this affects my constituency of South Down. South Down does not have the infrastructure to take on renewable energy sources. Indeed, as one engineer put it to me, if the go button were to be pushed on developing renewable energy in South Down, it would be four to five years between the process starting and getting renewable sources of energy production up and running. Likewise, there are projects and solutions in my constituency that cannot get operational as there is not the infrastructure. That needs to be addressed in any forthcoming strategy. As such, it must be reiterated that cross-departmental working must be to the fore in order to achieve a transition to cleaner energy. There are solutions — solar farms, wind turbines, potential for off-shore development and battery storage solutions — but all those need the grid infrastructure to support them, and, at the moment, that is lacking.

I am happy to support the motion and look forward to working to see it progressed.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Andrew. It is time for the Minister for the Economy, Conor Murphy, to respond. Minister, you have 15 minutes.

Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. [*Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.*] I thank the Members for bringing the motion to the Floor. It is an important issue, and I very much welcome the opportunity to speak on it. I am moving quickly to deliver on the economic plans that I set up when I took office. The plans have our energy ambitions at their core, obligations that are moral as well as legislative.

The cost-of-living crisis is exacerbated by the cost of energy, and that reflects the direct cost of reliance on fossil fuels. That cannot be allowed to continue; hence my focus on reducing our carbon emissions, as a key objective of my economic plans, and a move to sustainable renewable energy sources. The Consumer Council recently confirmed that the biggest issue facing 31% of all households was the cost of their energy bill. The research estimated that 51% of households here were in fuel poverty. A move to local, clean energy supplies will help us to break a chain that tethers us to global factors. I am keen that we become self-sufficient in our energy market, using the natural resources that we have in abundance on this island to generate affordable renewable power for local people and businesses.

I support the concept of energy transition proofing for all public policy and legislation. I support the inclusion of the development rights for green infrastructure, which rests with the Department for Infrastructure. Minister O'Dowd's Department and mine are already working closely. Yesterday, we met our respective officials to discuss a number of issues, including how planning and development can support the delivery of green infrastructure. I would expect all Departments to prioritise environmental issues, and the Executive are behind that approach.

The delivery of net zero, affordable energy is a key action for all Ministers as outlined in the energy strategy and the subsequent Climate Change Act. My Department is playing its part in making that ambition a reality and seizing the economic opportunities that transition into net zero will provide. Since taking office, I have introduced a moratorium on onshore petroleum licensing, which will be followed by a legislative ban. I have launched a five-year capital energy efficiency and renewable energy support grant for local businesses.

I have committed a further £25 million to energy invest-to-save projects across the central government estate. I have published a call for

evidence on biomethane, with another publication that is focused on biofuels to come shortly as we assess the potential alternatives to fossil fuels for heating. Invest NI is developing a net zero accelerator fund to provide government support for the development and delivery of innovative renewable technologies. My Department is also planning two major consultations on the support that people should get to help them through transition: one is on the future of low-carbon heat support; and the other is on the future of energy efficiency support.

4.15 pm

The move to decarbonise our economy and to net zero more broadly is a transition that we all need to embrace, and it will present opportunities to further my wider economic plans. The scale of the technological revolution that is required to deliver net zero is immense, and if we harness the ingenuity and renowned technological capacity of our workforce in response, we can become a world-leading exporter of skills, expertise and net zero solutions. If we successfully build a green economy, we can go beyond self-sufficiency and become a net exporter of affordable renewable energy. In doing so, we will create good jobs and support a better standard of living. We will also raise our productivity, which currently lags behind that of the rest of these islands.

Plenty of companies across the island are seizing opportunities for innovation and carving out a piece of the market for themselves. Whether it is Wrightbus in Ballymena, Ionic Technologies in Belfast, Octopus Energy and Plaswire in mid-Ulster, Glen Dimplex in Newry, or Mannok's pioneering green hydrogen valley in Fermanagh, our businesses are already rising to the challenge and meeting it head-on.

The motion acknowledges:

"the value of constructing and retrofitting houses",

and the amendment references the need for a

"large-scale social housing retrofit programme".

While I agree that it is important to acknowledge that responsibility for social housing lies with the Department for Communities, my Department co-chairs a residential decarbonisation coordination group along with the Department for Communities,

and that group has set out a high-level pathway for policy that is related to decarbonising homes, in line with each Department's area of responsibility. The Housing Executive has a responsibility, as the home energy conservation authority, to promote high standards of new housebuilding and to provide social housing whilst targeting social need.

My Department continues to work with colleagues in the Department of Finance on the reform of building regulations to produce a series of net zero-ready building standards, and I will ensure that that cross-departmental working continues to deliver on our collective responsibility. I will also ensure that lead Departments are afforded the opportunity to progress and report on important issues that are relevant to their own business areas, such as retrofitting, which is referenced in the amendment. Of course, the Departments themselves have to lead on that. Part of the amendment suggests that I lead on reporting, which is not possible, but I will certainly play my part in supporting that. Sinéad McLaughlin made a point about retrofitting. As part of a policy development process, officials have established stakeholder groups to support understanding the constraints that industry faces, particularly in heat and energy efficiency.

The motion calls on me:

"urgently to introduce ... legislation ... including to alter the terms of the Utility Regulator to incorporate oil within its role".

The proposer of the motion spoke to that, and I will make a few points about it. It is vital that any regulation that we bring forward benefits consumers, protects the vulnerable and is not rushed. We must avoid potential negative impacts on market conditions and available prices. It is worth noting that price controls will do little to tackle the underlying causes of oil price fluctuations. That is because the price regulator would have to allow the pass-through of legitimate input costs, most notably crude oil prices. In addition, the costs of regulation, including administrative and other indirect costs, could add further upward pressure on consumers' bills, and we want to avoid that at all costs.

The Department will continue to work with the Utility Regulator to understand what legislation is required in order to deliver our future net zero requirements. An important first step is a Bill enabling the Utility Regulator to support my Department in the development of low-carbon energy policies, and the Executive have recognised the importance of that legislation

and have agreed that it should issue for consultation. My Department also has plans to bring forward detailed legislation on a number of other areas during the mandate. We will succeed only by continuing to show leadership and collaborating strategically on the opportunities and investments that are needed to achieve our goals. By co-designing our policies along with those who are involved in a significant transition across multiple sectors, we will make sure that businesses and consumers are at the heart of this important change.

Contributors to the debate made a number of important points. The Committee Chair raised the issue of the regulator, which I have addressed. We have worked collaboratively with him over the 18-month period to develop a legislative solution that will support the Department in its obligations under the Climate Change Act and the Executive's energy strategy. That will provide a power whereby the regulator may provide information, advice and assistance to the Department to support the development of essential low-carbon energy policies and a qualified duty that it must, so far as reasonably practical, comply with any reasonable request that is made. The Executive have agreed that a public consultation will take place on the Bill. The Department for Infrastructure and the Department for Communities have expressed an interest in the Bill's being widened to support the decarbonisation of areas that are under their remit. That engagement will take place between officials in the coming week.

Steve Aiken mentioned the issues of the single electricity market and interconnection. The SEM is connected to Britain via two interconnectors: the Moyle interconnector between the North and Scotland, and the east-west interconnector between the South and Wales. However, as a result of EU exit, Britain is no longer part of the internal energy market, which has impacted trading across those interconnectors. The loss of efficient trading is a suboptimal position for the SEM and can contribute to higher prices. Transmission system operators (TSOs) and interconnector owners in the EU and Britain have been working on the development of new trading procedures, as required by the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, to address the issue. However, it is anticipated that it could be around four years before they are implemented. Officials will continue to monitor the progress of that important work and provide assistance and support, as required, to the British Government, TSOs and interconnector owners.

Steve Aiken mentioned offshore wind. An update of the previous strategic environmental

assessment is in progress. We intend to consult soon on potential areas for offshore development.

Another area that was mentioned by a number of Members, including Sorcha Eastwood, relates to skills. The Department has established an industry-led green skills delivery group. That group will look at skills across several areas in energy transition. The green skills action plan is due to be ready by September. We hope to be able to report on that. A number of other issues were mentioned with regard to skills, which I hope that I have addressed and will address by having that action plan ready by the end of the summer.

I agreed with a range of other contributions that were made. I will not repeat them, suffice to say that there are some points, certainly in relation to the Utility Regulator and oil, that we need to consider. I am not averse to doing that, but it needs to be considered in the round. There are more issues at play there than, perhaps, appear on the surface. On my leading on some of this, that will be a challenge because it covers other Ministers' responsibilities, but I am happy to support the spirit of what was intended through collaboration.

Collaboration across Departments will be key to all this. We have already started work with Infrastructure. Yesterday, I had a meeting with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. We had a discussion across the entire area with regard to green energy, environmental matters and net zero targets. Of course, we will work with Communities, Finance and other Departments as well. The best outcome that we can have, because it is an Executive-wide priority, is to ensure that Departments harmonise the work that we need to do in order to achieve this, and, as has been said many times during the debate, supporting people to be part of this in their transition will be key to ensuring that nobody is left behind. I am very happy to acquiesce to the motion and the amendment.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mark Durkan to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. Mark, you have five minutes.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.]* I must say that it is heartening to hear that parties are on the same page on energy transition, reducing costs for people who face financial hardships and recognition of the need to create a cleaner, greener energy market. As Mr McMurray said, in recent years, following the

fallout from the RHI scheme, renewables in Northern Ireland have almost become the "He who must not be named" of the energy sector. Now, with broad recognition of the need to move away from our reliance on fossil fuels and harness the opportunities that are offered by our unique position on renewable energy, I am hopeful that we can deliver a more magical outcome.

As outlined by contributors this afternoon, households and businesses alike are shouldering the financial burden of high energy costs, limited competition, sub-par infrastructure and reliance on fossil fuels. That is unsustainable and requires urgent attention. We must deliver a viable, long-term renewable energy plan — one that provides security of supply, ensures affordable renewable energy for all consumers and supports the transition to net zero. The rapidly growing sector has the potential to create thousands of jobs here, guaranteeing the improved health of our economy and our environment. The financial and practical benefits of a shift towards clean energies are clear-cut: that is why Governments everywhere are investing in home-grown renewable industries.

As other Members said, we need a whole-system approach to decarbonisation. It is clear that planning is an integral cog in the machine of decarbonisation. There must be collaboration between Departments to ensure that all the intricate parts work smoothly to drive us towards a more sustainable energy market. It is frustrating to see inefficiencies plaguing the planning system, with unnecessary delays, applications stuck in bureaucratic limbo and an apparent lack of will to do things differently. Much of that is caused by a lack of resources, be it in planning or across statutory consultees.

One solution lies in adopting a provision in the planning system for prioritising climate-friendly projects. That approach, which is akin to systems that have been implemented in Norway and Scotland and whose progressive policies appear to be light years ahead, allows for the expedited processing of projects that are aligned to net zero goals. I am cognisant, however, that that necessary shift from fossil fuels will not happen overnight, nor can it happen without adequate regulation.

That is why one of the core issues that we must address in any energy policy is energy efficiency in homes. I concur, therefore, with my colleague Ms McLaughlin that the retrofitting agenda must be front and centre of our discussions. The leaking of heat and money, pouring from homes across the North, is one of

the most important infrastructure priorities that we face. Addressing that concern would save hard-pressed families across the North hundreds of pounds every year on their energy bills, helping to end fuel poverty once and for all.

To date, schemes, including the Housing Executive's cavity wall insulation action plan, have borne little fruit. Only a fraction of properties have benefited from that initiative. Devastating cuts as a result of DFC's capital budget, which have been imposed on such upgrade and energy-efficiency schemes, including the affordable warmth programme, fill me with apprehension, not to mention the many tenants who are desperately awaiting energy-efficient measures.

Implementing a comprehensive housing retrofit programme in Northern Ireland is not merely a matter of improving energy efficiency; it is an investment in the health, comfort and financial well-being of the public. It would help to address the pressing need to upgrade ageing housing stock, reduce energy bills for households and be a step towards decarbonisation. By retrofitting homes with better insulation, efficient heating systems and renewable energy technologies, we can alleviate fuel poverty, improve indoor air quality and enhance overall living standards for generations to come. I am glad and grateful for the support that has been indicated for our amendment.

In conclusion, if we hope to achieve climate action targets for 2030 and 2050, a collaborative, cross-border and all-islands approach, and wider joined-up efforts with Europe, will be vital. We need a change in attitude from all politicians, energy suppliers, businesses and consumers. The building blocks for change are there: it is about knowing how to construct them effectively. *Tús maith leath na hoibre. [Translation: Well begun is half done.]*

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Abair sin. Go hiontach. *[Translation: You can say that again. Great.]* I call Peter McReynolds. Peter, you have 10 minutes to make your winding-up speech.

Mr McReynolds: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the contributors to the debate for their input. It touched on not only the challenges posed by the cost-of-living crisis faced by households across Northern Ireland and the climate emergency but the potential solutions that could lie out there, including a greener and more sustainable economy.

I will take this opportunity — my first — to welcome the Economy Minister back to his post.

4.30 pm

Members will no doubt have read the briefing document circulated by National Energy Action in advance of today's debate. It sets out the importance of today and the potential next steps from the Assembly, as well as the impact of energy prices on households here from a recent survey. We already heard that 41% of households spend at least 10% of their outgoings on energy costs, with 19% just coping with those costs, because they have not been able to afford the costs of energy. Grimmiest of all, we heard that one in 10 households is skipping meals to ensure that they have enough money to heat their home. When I read that last statistic just last night, I was reminded of a film that I saw eight years ago, 'I, Daniel Blake', and of the young mother in the film who skips meals so that she can feed her children. Those particular statistics are not from a film, however. Rather, it is real life that many here face, so it is essential that we as an Assembly and an Executive take the necessary steps to deliver energy that is sustainable and affordable and that we ensure that no gaps exist for people to fall between. It also shows me, as a new Member, the importance of having an Assembly again so that, when there are problems in our society, the mechanisms are there to address them, Ministers are there to take the necessary steps and we have a strategy or framework in place to work towards collectively for the benefit of everyone here.

The motion and the amendment contain key asks and set a direction that, I hope, the Minister will take us in, specifically when it comes to addressing our reliance on fossil fuels, energy transition and development rights for green infrastructure. As a member of the Infrastructure Committee, however, I think that it is also important to highlight the gaps that exist in our planning system, as has been mentioned in the debate, in order to achieve an increase in the renewables sector, a reduction in our reliance on fossil fuels and a rapid expansion of the domestic energy market. That is because, from April 2023 until March this year, less than half of total electricity consumption in Northern Ireland was generated from renewable energy sources. We can and must do better. There is significant untapped potential in renewable energy generation, especially from wind, in Northern Ireland, with here being one of the best places in the world to harvest the benefits of wind-generated energy. We truly could be a market leader in

that space. To do that, we need to take urgent measures to speed up the consenting of renewables and permitted development rights for green infrastructure and to give priority to projects that deliver renewable and low-carbon energy in the planning system.

As I have said before in the Chamber, 82% of renewable energy developers do not see Northern Ireland as an attractive place in which to invest, and, on average, it takes over three years for a wind farm application to be determined, with data from July 2023 showing that 125 applications for wind and solar farms are pending, the earliest of which was submitted in November 2012. That is important, because we will meet neither our "80 by 30" target nor the aims of the motion if we do not urgently address the gaps in our planning system. We need a planning system that has everyone singing from the same hymn sheet about what needs to be done to improve it and to deliver on the potential that we have in Northern Ireland. If we get that right, we can stimulate the green economy and deliver for all the people who live here, while also addressing fuel poverty.

I will now turn to this afternoon's debate. As I said, we welcome the amendment from Ms McLaughlin on the need to increase retrofitting of social housing, and I welcome the consensus around the Chamber on the topic. It is such motions and amendments that got me involved in politics, as I want to make a difference and ensure that we reach everyone across our society, regardless of their community or class. I acknowledge that there is an ambition in the Chamber today, and I always remember speaking at an event while I was Deputy Lord Mayor of Belfast. An esteemed environmentalist, Sir Jonathon Porritt, talked to me about the need to be ambitious in everything that we do and to go from there to see where we end up. I try to apply that in all the approaches of my politics and to do my best for everyone.

I will not run through all the contributions from Members, as I think that we have all been pretty engaged throughout. Two things, however, jumped out at me that were highlighted by a number of Members. The first was the figure cited by David Honeyford and by Sinéad McLaughlin that 70% of houses here are reliant on home heating oil and that we have the least-energy-efficient homes in Europe. I have been aware of that via a handful of oil clubs in East Belfast, where I am an MLA, that seek to buy oil in bulk in order to drive down the cost. Similar to Ms Eastwood, I have stood in too many homes in East Belfast that have walls painted

black by damp, homes that have children living in them who cough from the damp in the air or homes that have residents wearing extra layers just to get by each day. Today's debate can go some way to making sure that such situations never happen again.

Secondly, as a member of the Infrastructure Committee, it was welcome for me to hear the Chair of the Economy Committee, Phillip Brett, and Philip McGuigan talk about the good working relationship on that Committee on such matters. I am sure that the Infrastructure Committee will be keen to work jointly with that Committee when it comes to planning issues and the necessary reform of the system to support our net zero targets. It was good to hear the Minister for the Economy mention that he has been engaging with Minister O'Dowd on those issues in recent times.

I welcome the motion and the amendment. I welcome the goals and the ambition to secure a situation where fuel poverty is simply not allowed to happen again in Northern Ireland. It is crucial, however, that we work together to deliver a domestic renewable energy market for the benefit of our people and the planet.

Lastly, I welcome the fact that the Minister has accepted the need to work with the Utility Regulator — something that David Honeyford commented on — and note that his Department is exploring biomethane in particular, which is something that I was hearing about from Minister Muir today. He was energetic in his support for it, so my interest piqued when the Minister mentioned it.

I commend the motion and the amendment to the House.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the cost-of-living crisis is exacerbated by the cost of energy; further recognises that this constitutes the direct cost of a reliance on fossil fuels in an increasingly unstable world; endorses the concept of energy transition proofing for all public policy and legislation, including development rights for green infrastructure; acknowledges the value of constructing and retrofitting houses and offices, prioritising renewable energy sources; and calls on the Minister for the Economy urgently to introduce

the necessary legislation emerging from the current energy strategy, including to alter the terms of the Utility Regulator to incorporate oil within its role and to carry out its functions with due regard to the need to meet net zero targets; and further calls on the Minister to work with the Minister for Communities to agree a large-scale social housing retrofit programme to reduce domestic fossil fuel consumption and increase energy efficiency, starting with communities in highest disadvantage, and to make a statement to the Assembly on the progress of this programme within six months.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, just take your ease for a few moments.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Hospitality and Tourism: East Antrim

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): In conjunction with the Business Committee, I have given leave to Cheryl Brownlee to raise the matter of hospitality and tourism in East Antrim. I call Cheryl Brownlee, who has up to 15 minutes.

Ms Brownlee: I am sure that we are all well aware of the struggles of the high street. They are well documented, and there have been positive measures from central and local government to try to address those challenges. Today, I want to raise the cocktail of challenges that I see in my constituency. That mixture has created an increasingly difficult environment for successful trade for our hospitality and tourism industry in East Antrim.

I will take a closer look at Carrickfergus, which is located 15 minutes outside our capital city of Belfast. You would think that that would be positive, but we find that tourist buses roll into Carrickfergus in the morning and take a quick stop at the castle for a photo opportunity before the tourists reboard and are off up the road to the north coast. Carrickfergus is not being treated as a priority. We should market the seaside town as the gateway to the Causeway coast, whereas, at the minute, it is simply the toilet stop. The Department's failure to capitalise on Carrickfergus's unique position is having a detrimental impact on our tourism offering. Carrickfergus Castle, for example, is unique and is one of the most historically important castle garrisons in Northern Ireland.

Another significant factor that must be recognised is a major reduction in available bed-nights, following the recent closure of two prominent local hotels. Subsequent data from Tourism NI does not accurately reflect the downturn in bed-nights in East Antrim. While the mid and east Antrim area as a whole shows a positive trend in bed-nights, the reality for East Antrim is a dramatic reduction. We all know that a reduction in bed-nights results in a reduction in tourists staying and spending in the area. More and more, we see and hear that the lack of available facilities is directly impacting on hospitality businesses in the surrounding

area, some of which have seen a reduction in footfall of over 30%. Footfall counters purchased to monitor trade in Carrickfergus have shown a constant discrepancy between the footfall in Carrickfergus town centre and the NI average. For example, in October 2023, the average footfall across Northern Ireland increased by 2% from the previous year, compared with a shocking 23% reduction in footfall in Carrickfergus.

The added difficulty for Carrickfergus town centre is its location in the conservation area. While the preservation of history and heritage is absolutely key, we must strike a balance, moving forward, between conservation, preservation and a town that is open, adaptable and able to utilise its unique heritage as a vehicle for success. Conservation areas have planning stipulations to ensure that areas are in keeping with the aesthetic appropriate to the time period. Unfortunately, that comes with its own challenges. I give Members the example of my constituency office, located in the heart of Carrickfergus town centre in a conservation area. Like every other Member, I applied for planning permission to erect a sign, a basic sign that would have caused no issue in almost any town or village across Northern Ireland. However, due to my office's position in the conservation area directly across from the castle, the application resulted in more than six months of challenges, changes and stress before a final decision was made. That example is certainly not unique; plenty of other businesses have fallen foul of the stipulations. The requirement to hire a conservation architect, for example, is simply not financially viable for the vast majority of new businesses. In that regard, we need to create a space to preserve history and heritage whilst operating a common-sense approach.

A number of hospitality businesses have closed in Carrickfergus in recent times, with many others feeling the pinch and the pressure. Of course, that is regrettable, but we have to be honest and say that it is not hard to believe, when we look at some of the challenges that businesses face in Northern Ireland. It is interesting to note that, in East Antrim, we have twice as many young businesses — businesses that are one or two years old — than the rest of the UK. That is the time when businesses are most vulnerable to overheads such as VAT, high rent and rates and staff costs. That is when they need most support. I have also heard directly from numerous local businesses of the difficulties of recruiting and retaining staff, with so many forced to scale back operations or reduce opening hours due to a lack of staffing

provision, despite an increase in the minimum wage.

A recent survey carried out as part of the PEACE PLUS programme in mid and east Antrim showed that the number of derelict and dilapidated buildings in the town centre was the number-one issue for people in East Antrim. There is constant frustration in the community and in Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, owing to the limited powers that are afforded to the local authorities to deal with the issue. It not only tarnishes the overall look and aesthetic of the town but significantly reduces the retail space available to rent or buy, leading to an increase in price of the remaining stock. The new dilapidation Bill would be a welcome step in the right direction to address the issue and provide some hope to the town centres and city centres that have fallen victim to such dereliction.

I very much welcome Back in Business, a scheme that offers businesses a 50% rates reduction for up to two years if they move into premises that have been unoccupied for 12 months or more and were previously used for retail purposes. We all want to see our town centres and shopping areas thriving, and Back in Business aims to bring vibrancy, footfall and investment back into our high streets whilst providing businesses with a boost at the start of their business journey, helping to support jobs and bringing long-term vacant units back into use. However, while we must all continue to support new businesses, we must also support the businesses that struggled through the most difficult COVID years. On paper, the scheme is absolutely excellent, but, as it covers only businesses whose lease began after 1 April 2024 and as, of course, the premises must have been vacant, realistically, how many businesses will benefit from it?

Despite all the struggles and challenges that I have detailed, it would be remiss of me not to praise the incredible businesses, Carrickfergus Enterprise and the many support agencies in East Antrim. They have been and are keeping their businesses going, taking the risk, thinking outside the box and powering on to keep our town alive. Carrick Greengrocers, for example, has taken a different approach. It is the first community-owned greengrocer's and the first community-owned business in Carrickfergus town centre, selling locally grown fruit and veg alongside other produce from further afield, with lots of other locally made goods and treats. It aims to enrich the lives of people in Carrickfergus through high-quality, in-season food and to trade in a way that supports a sustainable environment and economy.

It has created a welcoming hub in the town centre that provides opportunities for learning, community, interaction and engagement, with all profits being directed back into the business or other local initiatives aimed at benefiting the Carrickfergus community.

4.45 pm

Only this weekend, we witnessed the spectacular Royal Landing festival, which drew tens of thousands of people from all over Northern Ireland and beyond to our wee corner of the world to experience culture and history coming alive on the streets of Carrickfergus. That type of cultural pageantry is popular in Northern Ireland. It represents a significant part of the tourism draw, along the lines of Tourism NI's experiential and thematic pillars of "Being Original", "Legends and Stories" and "awakeners". Those themes focus on the cultural history of the nation and its impact and contribution to the world's history, which we must continue to promote. The wider tourism strategy is to develop the Ulster-Scots project as a cultural resource for Northern Ireland. A recent economic study shows that the projected visitor and participant spend provided a direct economic impact of over half a million pounds for just one day. We have much to be positive about.

Those green shoots, however, must be recognised and supported to ensure growth, duplication and positivity in order to rejuvenate the town and beyond. I very much recognise that it is a cross-cutting issue that requires a collaborative response, but my aim is to get East Antrim on the agenda, for the struggles to be realised and for those sectors' urgent concerns to be heard and addressed sooner rather than later.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Thank you very much. All other Members who speak will have six minutes.

Mr Donnelly: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am happy to have the opportunity to contribute to the Adjournment debate. I thank my constituency colleague Cheryl Brownlee for securing the debate.

There is no shortage of options for tourists who visit East Antrim. Some are well known and renowned. For example, Carrickfergus Castle, which was mentioned, is one of the best-preserved Norman castles anywhere in these islands and is well preserved as a monument after 750 years of military operation. Several miles up the road is the Gobbins, a spectacular

cliff-face walk that has been restored to its former glory, along with a new cafe and exhibition and visitor facilities in nearby Ballystrudder. Our fascinating historical connections are evidenced through some of our brilliant museums, including Carrickfergus Museum; the Andrew Jackson cottage, which tells the story of the seventh US president, whose parents emigrated from Carrickfergus; and the Larne Museum and Arts Centre, which is located in the redeveloped and restored Carnegie Free Library in Larne.

North of Larne, we have the famous Antrim Coast Road, which is recognised as one of the greatest coastal drives in the world. Each village along that road, including Ballygally, Glenarm, Carnlough, Waterfoot and Cushendun, has its own sights and attractions, many of which have been positively highlighted by our growing film and TV industry, with shows such as 'Game of Thrones' being filmed in the area.

I could talk all day about the opportunities for tourism in East Antrim, but, given the time constraints, I will focus on what we need to do to confront the challenges facing hospitality in our constituency and what the Executive and UK Government could do to support our hospitality and tourism sectors. It has been pointed out many times that tourism and hospitality are interlinked. You cannot have a good tourism destination without hospitality.

It should be acknowledged that much of the tourism to East Antrim consists of tour groups, as the previous contributor mentioned, that visit specific sites over the course of one or two days. Many of those tours stop at Carrickfergus Castle, which is, obviously, welcome, but many immediately leave the town and head north without visiting the rest of Carrickfergus, missing out on the sights of the town and the positive hospitality that Carrick's many restaurants, bars and coffee shops have to offer. In other words, many people pass through our key towns and villages, but few stay for the day or overnight.

I noticed an interview with Howard Hastings in the 'Belfast Telegraph' today. He mentioned visitors, particularly those coming from GB. He said:

"I believe a lot of people in GB, when they think about holidays, only think about travelling east rather than west. There's what they call in tourism terms a 'well of ignorance' about Northern Ireland. They've chosen not to learn about us... and what we do... visitors from Great Britain who come to

Northern Ireland... bring with them three things: their passports, euros and plug socket adapters."

There clearly is some work to be done to make Northern Ireland an attractive place for tourists from GB.

The vast majority of international tourists who come to Northern Ireland come through the Republic of Ireland as part of a wider visit to the island of Ireland. Most will spend two or three days focused on Belfast, passing through East Antrim on the way to other tourist locations such as Portrush or Derry. In that respect, our tourism sector is under threat from the long-term impacts of Brexit, particularly if cross-border tourism is negatively impacted by the UK Government's plans for electronic travel authorisation (ETA) for non-UK and non-Irish citizens. We must work with the new Government to ensure that that measure does not hinder cross-border tourism, which is desperately needed.

Brexit has also resulted in a workforce crisis, as I have heard from many business owners who work in our hospitality sector in East Antrim. Brexit and the outgoing Government's obsession with confronting immigration have led to a reduction in available staff for many of our hotels, since many of our valued hospitality staff were EU nationals. The loss of EU funding will diminish opportunities for future planning and restoration such as we had in the past. For example, the restoration of the Gobbins, which we talked about, was delivered partly due to EU Peace funding. It remains to be seen whether UK equivalent schemes can deliver, but, so far, that appears unlikely.

We must do what we can to link our tourism attractions in East Antrim to the local economy so that people who visit them will benefit our local economy and businesses. More widely, the workforce crisis in our hospitality sector has led to shortages for many local businesses such as bars and restaurants, many of which can open only on certain days or restrict their days by, for example, opening only at weekends or in the evenings. Some have reduced menus as a result of not having sufficient resources. That decline is sadly evident in East Antrim and across Northern Ireland. It also reflects the difficult reality for many families who, in the cost-of-living crisis, cannot afford to eat out or to pay for increasingly expensive meals.

Other financial issues require the intervention of either central government in the UK or the Executive here. Many local B&B owners have

told me that the rates system does not work for them, as it is increasing their costs during an already difficult cost-of-living and cost-of-doing-business crisis. Some of the larger hotels in the constituency are similarly concerned about VAT and would welcome an urgent review of VAT for hospitality, saying that the margins of doing business are very slim. I note that that was one of the suggestions that Trade NI made in its economic report, 'The Prosperity Dividend', which was launched last year.

I look forward to hearing from the Economy Minister about what his Department can do to improve prospects for our tourism and hospitality sectors. I appreciate that much of what I have mentioned is outside his responsibilities, and, indeed, we need a coordinated approach from several Departments, including Finance, to any rates review; Infrastructure, to ensure effective transport links, particularly along the Belfast to Larne railway line; and Communities, to work to enhance our local heritage, including local campaigns to restore and improve historic buildings and other sites. I ask the Economy Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Donnelly: No problem. I agree with the Member who secured the debate that we have great potential and that we must do what we can to harness it for the benefit of our businesses.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Member for East Antrim for securing this important Adjournment debate. I declare an interest, as my family has owned and continues to own businesses in the shoe trade in Carrickfergus town centre for over 60 years and knows all too well the pressures that the Member referred to. I thank the Minister for coming along today. To be fair, it could have been one of four Ministers, given the litany of issues that affect tourism and hospitality. On the prohibitive rates system, his colleague could have come along. We have talked about dilapidation, and the Communities Minister could, no doubt, have played a role by looking at vesting powers and whatnot, which we have discussed before. The Infrastructure Minister could have spoken about the prohibitiveness of planning, as the Member mentioned in relation to the conservation area. I agree with her that a collaborative approach is needed. Such an approach is needed in cooperating with the council, which has also has a key role to play in this, whether in promoting the amazing tourist

offering that we have in East Antrim or promoting East Antrim in general.

The Member who spoke before me talked about the amazing tourist offering that we have — I remember referring to that in my maiden speech — whether that be Carrickfergus Castle, which is a phenomenal asset not just for East Antrim but for Northern Ireland; the Andrew Jackson Cottage and US Rangers Museum; the Gobbins; Carnfunnock Country Park; or the drive up to the gateway of the Causeway, which is just phenomenal. I think that Michael Palin described it as one of the most amazing in the world. It is quite sad, almost lamentable, that it took Timmy Mallett to come here to put East Antrim back on the map — he did it for the whole of Northern Ireland, let us be fair, in such an amazing way — and that the assets that we have are not promoted as regularly as they should be. Too often, we look outside Northern Ireland and our constituencies and forget just how good those assets are.

As Ms Brownlee said, we live in really difficult times. It is about promoting not just our amazing tourist offerings but our amazing hospitality offerings. Some of those hospitality offerings are also our tourist offerings. The Fallis family in Carrickfergus, for example, have promoted Dobbins Inn in really tight circumstances. That listed building is 500 or 600 years old and is linked to the castle and the town's history. The Fallis family provides some of the limited number of bed-nights in Carrickfergus, and they do it so well. They and others who provide hospitality outlets — hotels, bars, restaurants or bed and breakfasts — across East Antrim and Northern Ireland do so under massive pressure. The reality is that, if our bars and hotels were in England and Wales, they would benefit from 75% rate relief up to £110,000 and 100% rate relief if they were defined as being in a rural area. Our bars and hotels do not benefit in that way, but they pay the same overheads, if not greater overheads. In fact, the rateable value of those properties is invariably more expensive per square foot in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the United Kingdom. I find that lamentable.

We need to do all we can. This is outside the Minister's remit and is a matter for the Finance Minister, but we need to look at total reform of how the rates system burden is applied in Northern Ireland, because the system is no longer fit for purpose. It cannot be the case that an Amazon warehouse in a business park pays less per square foot than our vital hospitality and tourism industries do. If we truly want our town centres to grow and survive and for our

key assets and businesses to continue to grow, offer amazing employment and help promote our great tourism assets, we need to give them all the support we can. That discussion has been going on in this place for years, and we are no further down the line. That needs to be looked at.

Ms Brownlee referred to a dilapidation Bill, and I would firmly support that. That is needed not only in East Antrim but across the country. The reality is that some landlords, for whatever reason, do not uphold the principles of social responsibility, allowing their buildings to fall into disgusting and despicable disrepair and then to fall to the ground, and nothing can be done. Those buildings are usually in key asset areas where we want retail to thrive and tourists to visit. When other businesses in those areas are running to stand still, those landlords let their buildings fall to the ground. I am not sure which Department will bring legislation forward — again, there could be a collaborative approach — but I would love to see a legislative agenda that covers vesting powers similar to those in the Isle of Man, where a landlord or someone else who has allowed their building to fall into disrepair can be told, "You have six months or a year to do it up. If you do not, the state will take it off you and do it up. If you want to buy it back at full value, let's discuss it". That has to be done, because buildings are lying vacant.

Ms Brownlee also referred to the number of hospitality businesses that have closed. One of those is the big Swift complex down at the harbour. It is a key asset in a conservation area, right beside Carrickfergus Castle, that has become derelict and is falling into the sea, and nothing can be done to ensure the upkeep of that building. Sadly, it is the first thing people see when they arrive in Carrickfergus. Again, if we could look at a dilapidation bill or vesting powers, that would be hugely beneficial.

Although it is a reserved issue, we need to look at VAT reform. We need to push towards a rate of 5% or 7% for hospitality businesses. The businesses need that support. It would be a massive lifeline for them, given the pressures they face.

I could talk about this for an hour — I am sure we all could — but I thank the Member for bringing the Adjournment debate, the Minister for coming along and the other Members for contributing to the debate.

Mr Lyons: I, too, thank and congratulate Ms Brownlee for bringing the Adjournment debate. I will also mention the Royal Landing at the weekend, which was a fantastic event. The

Member is very humble: she did not mention her involvement in that event, but it would not have happened without her. I am grateful to her and her team, who put in so much work to make it such an extraordinary event.

In years gone by, I worked in the tourism industry at some of our fantastic attractions on the north coast. I worked at the Giant's Causeway and Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge, where I told people about the history of the bridge and, on a number of occasions, rescued people who had got stuck midway across it. The fear had got hold of them, and they needed gentle — sometimes not so gentle — coaxing to bring them back safely to the other side.

It was fantastic to be there engaging with so many tourists and showing them a little of what we had to offer in Northern Ireland. One disheartening element of the job was that so many tourists said to me that they were only on a day trip to Northern Ireland from the South. They came up to see the greatest hits, the best attractions, and then went back down the road. They did not stay overnight or spend much money, and they did not see all that we had to offer.

5.00 pm

Thankfully, that has now changed. We have Titanic Belfast and other attractions that hold people in Northern Ireland for longer. Tour operators are offering longer stays. I do not want East Antrim to be bypassed in the way that the rest of Northern Ireland was in the past, but that is what is happening. I hope that people, rather than leaving Belfast and going up to the north coast, will leave Belfast and come through East Antrim. Do we not have so much to offer? As has been mentioned a number of times, we have Carrickfergus Castle, the Andrew Jackson cottage and the US Rangers centre. You can go into wonderful Whitehead and visit the fantastic railway museum there or walk the Blackhead path. We have the Gobbins, which is an outstanding attraction. Anyone who has not been there should try that out. We have so many fantastic walks and waterfalls around Larne. We have the Antrim coast road as well, which others mentioned. Of course, we should now plug Slemish as well, because it will be in our constituency very soon. I think that you will agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, that we have a lot to offer. I hope that others will see that and that we promote it.

When I was in the Minister's position, I engaged with Tourism Ireland and Tourism NI stakeholders, and, on international trips, I

always made sure to mention East Antrim. I hope that the Minister will continue in that vein and ensure that East Antrim is mentioned on all his engagements, because we have so much to offer. I hope that he will engage with those organisations and make sure that a plan is in place to promote what is a fantastic part of the world. We do not say that just because we represent it; we see it, and we hear it from others as well. I hope that the Minister will work with the councils in that area.

We have a number of challenges in the tourism sector. Budgets are tight, promotion can be limited, and the issues with infrastructure and accommodation have been raised. However, there is one thing that we should be pressing for, and I am sure that the Minister will agree with me on this: one way of getting more tourists to Northern Ireland relates to air passenger duty. I recognise that it is outside the Minister's control, but we should be jointly lobbying the UK Government on that issue. Clear economic data shows the benefit that the removal of air passenger duty can have. We saw it in the Netherlands and in the Republic. I do not think that there is an environmental benefit from that tax being in place, because people will fly. They might just fly into Dublin instead or into somewhere else altogether. I do not think that it is a fair tax, and it limits our ability to bring more people into Northern Ireland and their ability to stay for longer.

Of course, the other issue, as raised by the Member who secured the debate and others, relates to hospitality. Many of our hospitality businesses have had a torrid time over the past number of years. COVID was exceptionally difficult, and they now face many other challenges as well. It is not often that there truly are silver bullets that help us tackle the issues that we face, but one of the things that we really can do to make a change is to get the Government to look at VAT on tourism and hospitality. Hospitality businesses that come to meet me say that VAT is the difference between their being able to survive and not surviving. Across East Antrim, we all have examples of businesses, some in the very recent past, having to close down because of it. We do not have a lot of tools in our armoury, but VAT is one. I reiterate the comments made by John Stewart on rates. Even though we get Barnett consequentials, some of the discounts available in the rest of the UK are not available here

Another huge issue is skills. Lots of good work has gone on in Tourism NI. I commend the work of the Hospitality and Tourism Skills (HATS) network as well. Skills are one of the

biggest issues that we face in the sector right now.

I hope that action can be taken on all these issues to ensure that the right conditions are in place for tourism and hospitality to thrive in East Antrim.

Mr Dickson: I thank Ms Brownlee for securing the debate. I have represented East Antrim in various guises, first as a local councillor in Carrickfergus for 25 years and then, since 2011, as a Member of the Assembly for the constituency. I am very proud to represent the region, not only because of the incredible people who live there but because of its unparalleled natural beauty. Do not take that just from me. Others have already referred to the fact that the Causeway coastal route has been rated by 'National Geographic' magazine as one of the most beautiful places in the world. Arguably, the best parts of it are in East Antrim, such as the panorama when standing at the Knockagh monument, looking out over Belfast lough, all the way up to Carrickfergus Castle.

Arguably, some of the best parts of East Antrim start in Carrickfergus. The area is a testament to the unique charm and global appeal of East Antrim. As others have mentioned, our Gobbins path represents an excellent opportunity to attract more tourists, offering a truly unique experience. I am pleased that phase 2 of the project secured some £13 million from the Belfast region city deal for a purpose-built visitor centre in Islandmagee. Moreover, that deal allocated £43 million for town regeneration funds, which will include a new visitor centre at Carrickfergus Castle. That landmark would benefit from greater cooperation between the Department and the local authority, which is Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. The council understands the local issues, such as extending the castle's opening hours. My constituency office, like Ms Brownlee's, is only a few steps away from the castle. I witness buses arriving early in the morning and then leaving because they cannot get into the castle. They then go to other parts of East Antrim and beyond to explore the tourist take.

As others have said, the town of Carrickfergus is ripe for regeneration. We have, however, already spent a lot of money on regenerating Carrickfergus. In 2014, we spent a lot of money on a new public realm scheme, but much of it has since fallen into disrepair or has failed to be looked after by either the local authority or those who were responsible for it in the first place. I was appalled when some of the stones in the pedestrian area were removed for some essential works — water or electricity — and

replaced by tarmac. As a local councillor, I remember being told that we had an additional store of the appropriate stone to put back down. It took months to find it and put it back down. It is really disappointing to come into a town that has a lovely paved area only to be met with tarmacked areas.

Progress has been made through our townscape heritage initiative, which has brought apartments to above shops in Carrickfergus, but much more needs to be done to capitalise on the town's potential. Our council has increasingly capitalised on East Antrim's tourism offerings, but it is imperative that it continue to engage fully with the private sector and local stakeholders. Tourism Northern Ireland and Tourism Ireland need to step up their efforts to promote East Antrim's potential. Whether it is from our shores or our glens, East Antrim has so much to offer. Massive investment in our infrastructure, such as the A2 and A8 public transport improvements, have been transformative for East Antrim, making it accessible from Belfast and Dublin. Train timetables remain problematic, however. Despite an increase in passenger demand, the dualling of the single track across the Lagan on the Dargan Bridge still has not come to fruition. Increasing the frequency of transport services is necessary to match the efficient services that tourists expect. They get them everywhere else in Europe, but they do not get them here. I fear that the recent fare increases will deter passengers even more.

Moreover, support is needed for the Whitehead Railway Museum. It is operated by the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland, which is a major contributor to that niche area of tourism. It is, however, so bogged down in rules and regulations that it cannot provide drivers to get steam trains out on to the main line. It is disgraceful to think that one of the major refurbished steam engines from Whitehead is currently operating in the Republic of Ireland. It is coming to the end of its licence and needs its boiler replaced. The only way to get it back to Whitehead, which is the only place on the island of Ireland where it can be repaired, is to put it on a low-loader and bring it back. That is disgraceful. Departments need to get energetic and get those sorts of issues resolved as quickly as possible.

A Carrickfergus city deal regeneration meeting will be held in Carrickfergus town hall on Wednesday 26 June. I encourage anyone, including all the Members who are here, to come along to that session and see what we can do together to give our support to the town of Carrickfergus, the local authority and the

traders and businesses in the town that are crying out for help from the Assembly and their local authority.

Finally, I place on record my thanks to all those who work in the hospitality trade across East Antrim.

Mr McGuigan: This is a timely opportunity to debate tourism as we head into the busiest time of the year for our tourism and hospitality sector. I thank Ms Brownlee for securing the debate, which is specifically about East Antrim. Obviously, I am not an East Antrim MLA, but I am my party's tourism spokesperson and I was elected to represent the neighbouring constituency of North Antrim. I will not get into a bunfight with Stewart Dickson on which part of the north coast is the most beautiful; we will leave that for another time.

It is interesting that, in 2003, when I was first elected to the Assembly, Cushendun, Cushendall and Glenariff were in the North Antrim constituency and helped to get me elected. Those places have been lost to East Antrim. *[Laughter.]* I am disappointed that Slemish has gone in the same direction. Most people are not politicians and so do not care about electoral boundaries and see no difference. From a North Antrim perspective, my club, Dunloy, had many a clash at all ages in hurling with clubs from the glens, and I am pretty sure that they consider themselves to be North Antrim in spirit.

As well as being lucky enough to represent any part of County Antrim as an elected representative, I am lucky enough to be healthy enough to be able to cycle on a regular basis to some of the places that we have talked about, covering all parts of County Antrim and along the north coast. I am not going to argue with anything that anybody has said about the unique landscape and nature of that part of County Antrim. I have no intention of going into the detail that constituency MLAs went into.

I am my party's tourism spokesperson, so I will say just a few words. Obviously, East Antrim has plenty to offer in tourism. Some of that has been talked about, including, to name a few, the Gobbins cliff path, the Causeway coastal route, the 'Game of Thrones' filming locations and Glenariff forest park. Golf tourism has some potential, and I know, from discussions that I have had, that there are exciting additional golf tourism opportunities in East Antrim. As we know, tourism in general has a key role in driving economic growth, addressing regional imbalance and creating jobs. It can also be an enabler for community wealth-building, giving

communities ownership of their economic development and ensuring that tourism is sustainable and in harmony with the local community and environment. It is therefore important that we continue to keep a focus on tourism and explore all possible opportunities to ensure that it realises its full potential in East Antrim, North Antrim and across the North.

One such opportunity that I have spoken about before in the Chamber is the compelling case for the extension of the Wild Atlantic Way to the north coast, including East Antrim. A recent report by Fáilte Ireland on the economic impact of the Wild Atlantic Way found that it is worth more than €3 billion per year in tourism revenue to communities along the west coast of Ireland, leading to an additional 35,000 jobs and supporting 80,000 jobs in total. The success of that brand is something that we can benefit from and build upon to enhance our visitor numbers. Why should we in the North, in areas such as North Antrim and East Antrim, miss out on the opportunity to extend the Wild Atlantic Way from Donegal through Derry and the north coast and along the glens of Antrim through East Antrim towards Belfast? The case for expanding the Wild Atlantic Way to incorporate the Causeway coastal route is compelling.

5.15 pm

We know, from a recent report on tourism on the island of Ireland, that there has been a significant increase in day trippers and short-stay visitors from the South to the North. Growing numbers of international visitors flying into Dublin are adding destinations across the North to their holiday itineraries. As others have said, we should be ensuring that all parts of the North can benefit from that. The potential for growth is clearly there. The natural, historical and unique attractions that we have need to be shown. They are innovative and resilient.

As others have indicated, there are challenges. The electronic travel authorisation policy from the British Government increased the cost of overheads in the recruitment and retention of staff. I welcome the Minister's recognition that the tourism and hospitality sectors require investment support when he announced his intention to put together a tourism implementation group and create a tourism partnership board.

I commend all who contribute to our fantastic tourism and hospitality offering, particularly as we head into the peak holiday months of July and August. I hope that we see many tourists and our businesses see many benefits, and

would it not be great if we got the weather to match?

Ms McLaughlin: I welcome this debate on hospitality and tourism in East Antrim, and thank Ms Brownlee for securing it. She is passionate about her constituency, as I am about mine, and when you visit East Antrim, it is not hard to see why.

East Antrim, from Cushendun down to Carrickfergus, has some of the most breathtaking views that you will see anywhere in Northern Ireland, and, like my beautiful city of Derry, culture and history also rhyme in Carrickfergus. It is an area of profound natural beauty that encapsulates some of the most beautiful areas across the North. When people visit the glens of Antrim, it is no exaggeration to say that the views that they find are some of the most spectacular on this island. It is a favourite spot for day trippers as well as those who stay longer, and we need to get people to stay longer when they do come to Northern Ireland.

The hospitality sector is fundamental to the success of that offering across East Antrim, in particular to the success of the tourism industry. It is the lifeblood of a thriving economy in any community, generating and driving wealth as well as social inclusion, and improving well-being. In fact, every £100 spent in the hospitality industry generates added value to the local economy of about £58, and that is a really impressive return on investment.

Tomorrow, the Economy Committee will be pleased to hear evidence from Hospitality Ulster about the challenges and opportunities for the sector. I have no doubt that it will state some of the challenges that the Member outlined in opening the debate. Tourism growth can help every part of Northern Ireland to thrive, not least East Antrim, which already has a lot to offer. I have no doubt that we will, as I said, also hear about the challenges, especially as a result of the lingering effects of the pandemic. Indeed, the rising cost of doing business is, itself, a challenge. As Ms Brownlee mentioned, those challenges include the need for support for recruitment and retention in the sector, including the development of hospitality skills that are badly needed. A total of 17% of businesses in the hospitality industry have reported that they are at risk of failure in the next year, with intervention needed as a matter of urgency on small business rates relief and a cut in VAT.

The tourism sector across the North is one of the biggest success stories of our peace process. However, the sector faces challenges,

including a need to support businesses that are driving the sector's growth and a lack of a coherent approach from the Government. We cannot debate the challenges facing tourism in any part of Northern Ireland without raising the crucial need for mitigations when it comes to the electronic travel authorisation (ETA) scheme. The sector has been crystal clear that the ETA is unworkable here, and, in fact, it has the potential to be deeply damaging. We need to see Ministers in Stormont stepping up and marshalling opposition to its implementation. The SDLP has been resolute in calling for a tourism strategy and action plan that is fit for purpose and includes investment that commits to concrete and tangible measures and targets for those industries.

We must back up the warm words that are often said in the Chamber about hospitality and tourism with the action that East Antrim and every other constituency needs. I wish East Antrim many, many tourists with full pockets of money over the holiday season and, in fact, right through the autumn and at other times. It has a lot to offer, including the warmth of its people. I welcome being part of the debate.

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

Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy): Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.]* I thank the Member for securing the Adjournment debate, and I thank all those who contributed, particularly the representatives from the constituency. They spoke with passion about East Antrim and the tourism offering there. I have, on several occasions, stayed in Cushendun and Cushendall, so I can attest to all the attractions.

As has been outlined, there is much that contributes to the tourism offer in East Antrim, such as Carrickfergus Castle, the Gobbins and Glenarm Castle estate, as well as its stunning coastline and, of course, the glens of Antrim. The area is an integral part of the Causeway coastal route, which, for many years, has been a key attractor for local and international visitors. It is strongly promoted by Tourism NI and Tourism Ireland. Those tourism experiences slow visitors down on their journey and encourage them to spend more time and, in turn, inject additional revenue into the local economy.

Since 2020, Tourism NI has invested over £1 million in the Mid and East Antrim and Antrim and Newtownabbey council areas as part of their experience and market development

funding programmes. The investment has helped to fund experiences such as the new visitor centre and trails at Glenarm Castle, the development of Glenarm marina and the provision of bikes and tours in villages such as Whitehead, Glenarm and Islandmagee. Businesses in the constituency have also benefited from the initiatives that Tourism NI put in place to support the industry's recovery from the impact of the pandemic. Tourism NI regularly promotes the east Antrim area through its seasonal marketing campaigns across the island, and the Causeway coastal route features heavily in Tourism Ireland's promotion of the island to overseas audiences.

In recent times, my Department and Tourism NI have been working closely with Mid and East Antrim Borough Council on the development of the new Gobbins phase 2 project as part of the Belfast region city deal, which was mentioned by a number of Members. The contract for funding that was signed last month with Mid and East Antrim council will see my Department contribute £12.6 million towards the cost of delivering the project. That will result in a newly engineered staircase, creating a circular, closed-loop pathway that will unlock the full potential of the existing attraction and enhance overall visitor experience. Once complete, the project should see visitor numbers increase to over 400,000 per year, bringing with it a substantial increase in tourism spend right across the constituency. Tourism NI has also been providing ongoing advice and support to the £42 million Carrickfergus regeneration city deal project. That will see much-needed investment in Carrickfergus Castle, enhancing the visitor experience in the castle, as well as delivering improvements to the public realm around Carrickfergus town.

Last year, a joint application by Tourism NI, Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland to the Shared Island Fund was successful in securing €7.6 million as part of a brand alignment project involving the Causeway coastal route and the Wild Atlantic Way, which was referenced by Philip McGuigan during his contribution. Pre-development work has already begun, and that brand alignment project will help improve the discovery points and visitor experience along the Causeway coastal route. It will also ensure that a consistent and high-quality driving route sits alongside the Wild Atlantic Way. Members will be aware that discussions are ongoing to progress the extension of brands such as the Wild Atlantic Way and Ireland's Ancient East into the North.

Tourism has a major role to play in delivering a greener, regionally balanced and productive

economy that provides good jobs, and my officials and I look forward to working with the councils and the wider tourism industry in East Antrim to ensure that the area can fully benefit from the realisation of the economic plans.

I will refer to points that were made by Members, and I will try to pick them up in order. Hospitality support was mentioned, and Gordon Lyons expanded on that when talking about the skills needed. We are working closely with the hospitality sector on a tourism strategy, but we also had a direct meeting last week about the skills agenda and how the sector can try to tap into that. There is a very strong need for that in the hospitality sector. We can attract all the tourists if we do that well enough, but we need to have people working in the sector in order to be able to service it.

Issues that relate to town centre dereliction, the back in business scheme and dilapidation are, of course, as people acknowledged, another Department's responsibilities, but I believe, having been in that Department once, that rates relief for dereliction should be revisited. That is because, while it might take some time to bring legislation through to try to enforce disposal of those properties, the lack of a rates bill for derelict properties certainly does not encourage anyone to do anything with them.

Other rates issues and VAT were raised. Again, air passenger duty is an issue for the Department of Finance. During my time there, we raised those issues consistently with the British Government. I hope and expect that the current Finance Minister will continue to do that with the incoming Government to see whether we can get some more joy on it. Of course, I recognise that, while those are other Departments' responsibilities, we have collective responsibility in all those areas. I am very happy to work with the Finance Minister, the Infrastructure Minister and others on the issues that have been mentioned in order to ensure that we work together to try to promote the tourism industry, which is a key part of our economy here.

I never suspected that I would hear the name of Timmy Mallett associated with East Antrim in all my days in the Assembly, but there you go. I am very interested in the Communities Minister's experience as a tourism promoter, particularly his experience at Carrick-a-Rede bridge. I have to think that coaxing people from positions in which they find themselves reluctantly should serve him well in his political life as he goes forward. *[Laughter.]* I will undertake to promote East Antrim. I must check the record for how often Newry and Armagh

was promoted while you were in this position, but I assure you that I will reciprocate on that.

Electronic travel authorisation was mentioned. I have raised that with British Government Ministers. Of course, we will take the opportunity to continue to raise it with the incoming Government. I do not think that the impact that such a policy would have on this island is fully understood. Clearly, the tourism industry, as a whole, is very exercised about the issue, and we will continue to raise it.

I thank Members for raising those issues. I have learnt more about East Antrim in the past hour than I had previously, even though I have stayed in it. I assure people that not only will we continue to work with you on promoting tourism in all our areas, including East Antrim, but we will work collectively as an Executive — I am sure that the Communities Minister could concur with that — in order to try to ensure that we do our best for the tourism sector, which is, as I say, a key part of our overall economic product here, and particularly for East Antrim, which the Member who brought forward the Adjournment topic raised.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): It would be remiss of me not to point out that I will be enjoying the hospitality of East Antrim this Sunday at Larne Swimming Club's barbecue at Magheramore — that is a bit of an advertisement — where we will support some of our Olympians. I will just put that out there. Members from East Antrim, you are more than welcome to come along.

Adjourned at 5.28 pm.