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Weir, Peter (Strangford)
Wells, Jim (South Down)
Woods, Miss Rachel (North Down)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 11 October 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

James Brokenshire

Mr Speaker: I formally put on record the Assembly's condolences on the passing of James Brokenshire. As you will know, he was Secretary of State here for a relatively short time, but it was at a particularly difficult time. I know that Members will be saddened by his untimely death at the age of just 53. We send our sympathies to his wife, Cathy, to his three children, and to his wider family, his friends and his colleagues. I worked with James Brokenshire during his tenure as Secretary of State and met him on a number of occasions. I always found him to be very civil and mild-mannered but professional and diligent in the course of his duties.

Resignation of Member: Mrs Arlene Foster

Mr Speaker: I have received a letter of resignation from Mrs Arlene Foster as a Member of the Assembly for the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency. I have notified the Chief Electoral Officer, in accordance with section 35 of the NI Act 1998.

New Assembly Member: Mrs Deborah Erskine

Mr Speaker: I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mrs Deborah Erskine has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency to fill the vacancy resulting from the resignation of Mrs Foster. This morning, Mrs Erskine signed the undertaking and the Roll of Membership and entered her designation in my presence and that of the Clerk to the Assembly. She has now taken her seat. I welcome her to the Assembly and wish her every success.

Minister for Communities

Mr Speaker: I have received notification from the Minister for Communities that, owing to illness, she is unable to attend the Chamber today to take forward her Department's business, including Question Time and responding to the private Members' motion on the arts and creative industries. The Minister has asked me to convey her apologies to the Assembly. I will ask the Business Committee to reschedule questions to the Minister for Communities when it meets tomorrow.

Members' Statements

Mr Speaker: If Members wish to be called to make a statement, they should indicate that by continually rising in their place. Members who are called will have up to three minutes in which to make their statement. Members are reminded that statements will not be subject to debate or questioning, that interventions will not be taken and that I will not take any points of order on statements or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Bedroom Tax

Ms Ferguson: I take this opportunity to highlight the continued delay at the Executive in bringing forward for discussion the legislation prepared by the Communities Minister to ensure that the bedroom tax is not implemented here. The bedroom tax is yet another heartless Tory tax aimed at the most vulnerable. Therefore, most reasonable people would agree that binning it, once and for all, would be a hugely positive move for the Assembly.

Shortly after coming into post, Minister Hargey gave her commitment to do just that. She has prepared the necessary legislation, secured the budget lines and repeatedly brought it to the Executive for approval. However, to date, it remains stalled, with no explanation. For every week without progress, our constituents remain impacted by it, not just those who currently have to pay the Tory tax but those who remain in their property, because they know that, if they move, even to a smaller property, they will fall foul of the tax if the smaller property has an extra bedroom. That is not acceptable.

I implore those who sit around the Executive table to ensure that this proposal is tabled and to support the binning of the bedroom tax. I commend the Minister for Communities for her continued efforts on the matter, and I commend such organisations as the Cliff Edge Coalition, which has been tireless in its campaign on this. I welcome the opportunity to put my support for binning the bedroom tax firmly on the record.

Glider Scheme: South Belfast

Mr Stalford: When is a consultation not a consultation? I suggest that a consultation is not a consultation when there is merely one option to be consulted upon. That is precisely the experience of my constituents in relation to the proposed route of the Glider in South Belfast: there is one option in the consultation exercise, namely the Ormeau Road. The

Department, to paraphrase Henry Ford, assures us that you can have whatever colour of car you like, provided it is black. I represent local businesses on the Ormeau Road, and it is important that I reflect their concerns about the proposal. Anyone who knows that road will know that, for a stretch of it, rear access for delivery vehicles to businesses is not a possibility. However, it is proposed that, for vast swathes of the day, those delivery vehicles will not be allowed to enter the Glider lane. That raises significant concerns for the local businesses and their future viability, and I have been asked to raise those concerns here.

I would like to see a wider consultation from Translink and the Department, and, despite the fact that I belong to the party that I belong to, I suggest that the Minister and the Department be prepared to consider alternative routes. It is important that those views are heard. There is a comparison between my constituency and that which the Minister represents. In North Belfast, an active and healthy debate is going on as to what the best route for the Glider should be. Meanwhile, in the south of the city, we cannot have a debate on the best route because we have been offered only one option. The consultation period has ended, and I have no doubt that the findings will be that the huge majority of people are in favour of the proposal. Of course they will be in favour of the proposal, by a huge majority, if the alternative is to not have a Glider route, and, of course, the result that comes back from the consultation will be that a majority say that they are in favour of the proposal. However, I urge government, the Department and Translink to show more flexibility and to be prepared to engage constructively, particularly with businesses on the Ormeau Road that are deeply concerned about the implications that this will have for them. I know that the Minister will act with goodwill in that regard — I am glad to see her in the Chamber — and I hope that she will engage actively and constructively with those of us who think that an alternative should be considered.

Dr Michael Watt

Ms Mallon: "Devastated", "betrayed" and "gut-wrenching": just some of the words used by Michael Watt's patients to describe their reaction when it was revealed last week that the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service (MPTS) had allowed Dr Watt's voluntary application to be removed from the medical register. That action ensured, yet again, that Michael Watt, the doctor at the heart of the biggest patient recall in Northern Ireland, would be afforded the protection of privacy and secrecy behind closed

doors and that his patients would be denied openness and transparency. So serious was that move by the MPTS that it promoted a very rare angry response from the GMC, which stated that it was "extremely disappointed" by that decision as it:

"felt it was in the public interest for the allegations to be heard by the tribunal in an open and transparent way".

It is that lack of openness, transparency, accountability and consequence that have been the hallmarks of the entire traumatic experience for patients.

Since December 2017, when I sent the first email to the Belfast Trust on behalf of a patient, to the attempts to silence the first BBC 'Spotlight' programme, to the decision by the MPTS, patients have continued to battle against a wall of secrecy. Some four years on, not one person, be it Michael Watt or those in positions of responsibility who allowed this to happen to thousands of patients, has been held to account, and nor have there been any consequences for action or inaction. Meanwhile, patients continue to suffer, and they are driving themselves mad wondering how and why this was allowed to happen to them.

On the "how", the public inquiry will, no doubt, identify major structural and cultural issues in the health service that need to be addressed. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority inquiry will provide some answers to those who lost loved ones under the doctor's care, but it needs to move much more quickly.

The question that patients have is: "Why?". Why did the doctor in whom they put so much faith and trust do that to them? Those are questions that they were looking to Michael Watt to answer publicly. That is what they expected to hear from a public inquiry at the GMC, and they have been denied that important part of the healing process. The only voice that we heard directly from Michael Watt was in his text messages to "Jane", as exposed in the recent 'Spotlight' programme. I, for one, did not see any remorse there.

I will end on this point. There is a lot of focus on the fragility and vulnerability of the doctor at the heart of this story. However, I have seen vulnerability and fragility. I have sat with couples whose marriages broke up as a result of this and with young women who have not had any children due to the medical advice given by Dr Watt. Others have had their careers ruined because they were misdiagnosed and

mis-prescribed. They are vulnerable and have not received any protection.

Baby Loss Awareness Week

Ms Armstrong: I start by apologising to anyone who may be triggered or upset by my statement. I make my statement in order to raise awareness of Baby Loss Awareness Week and to highlight the fact that this Friday, 15 October, is our annual Baby Loss Awareness Day.

Baby Loss Awareness Week is very important to many of us who have suffered miscarriages. As we know, miscarriage continues to be the taboo grief: the silent grief that remains undiscussed and suffered, often alone. Baby Loss Awareness Week is a time when parents, siblings and families can remember their lost children.

On Saturday evening, I joined parents and families on a candlelit walk through Belfast to mark the start of Baby Loss Awareness Week. Some cried, some talked about their children and some were there to give support. I thank the Miscarriage Association in Northern Ireland for arranging that event.

As the saying goes, it is good to talk, but often when we have had a miscarriage, we cannot talk about our loss, and many of us grieve alone in silence. That means that many parents have mental health trauma added to their loss. That is why the theme of this Baby Loss Awareness Week is well-being.

The pandemic resulted in a reduction in access to early pregnancy services. So far, options for the management of miscarriage, surgical and medical, have yet to be restored to pre-pandemic levels, and that is having a significant impact on women and their partners. Reduced access can mean anxiety, distress and a lack of guidance about what is happening. Many women are being told to let nature take its course, which means miscarrying at home, often unprepared for the duration of the pain and bleeding, which can result in women suffering symptoms of PTSD. That is all happening in Northern Ireland today. When we think of well-being, we must also include the staff who care for miscarriage parents and ensure that they too have the support for that difficult and distressing area of work.

In the Assembly, we are considering the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill.

As the Northern Ireland Assembly, we have the opportunity to include miscarriage in that legislation to ensure that we play a proactive part in recognising miscarriage, acknowledging a baby loss and, at last, taking baby loss bereavement out of the shadows, stopping it being a taboo and supporting parents at a time when they need it. There is also an opportunity to ensure that support is provided for parents through the National Bereavement Care Pathway, and I look forward to working to ensure that miscarriage is included in those plans.

12.15 pm

This Friday, at 7.00 pm, I will, again, light my 13 candles as part of the Wave of Light to remember all babies born too soon.

Court Care Home

Mr McGuigan: I primarily wish to raise the issue of staff at Court Care Home in Ballymoney.

Ach, ar an chéad dul síos, ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a ghabháil leis na trí foirne ó Aontroim thuaidh a bhain cluichí ag an deireadh seachtaine. First, though, I want to pass on my congratulations to the three north Antrim clubs that achieved county hurling success over the weekend. GAA is obviously hugely important to many north Antrim parishes, so for Con Magee's in Glenravel, Carey Faughs and my own club, Cuchullains in Dunloy, this has been a special weekend. I suspect that the victory celebrations will carry on for a day or two and then the three clubs will get down to preparing for assaults on the Ulster title, so I pass on my congratulations and wish them adh mór in their Ulster campaigns.

I welcome the fact that all residents of the Court Care Home in Ballymoney have now been relocated, but greater scrutiny is required to shed some light on how the closure of the care home came about. I ask the Health Minister and his Department to intervene and make sure that the staff of that care home are properly looked after. At this point, staff have received only 60% of their September wages and have received nothing beyond that for October, despite the fact that staff were turning up for work up until last Thursday to ensure that residents were being cared for.

Over 20 staff of that home, some with 17 years' experience and service, have yet to receive formal notice of redundancy. The Minister cannot allow those staff members to be

collateral damage in this saga. I also want the Minister and his Department to investigate how the situation arose in the first place and the governance rules that allow private investors to own the bricks and mortar of our care homes on the basis that they are being told that care home investments will provide twice the return of normal investments. We need a system here in the North that protects the residents of our care homes and ensures that care is always the primary purpose and is always placed over and above private profit.

Pulmonary Fibrosis

Mrs Cameron: I wish to draw attention to a matter of great importance to many in Northern Ireland who suffer from pulmonary fibrosis, the most common being idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis (IPF), which is a lung condition that scars your lungs and reduces the efficiency of breathing.

Many will remember campaigning by support groups associated with Action for Pulmonary Fibrosis recently, which called on the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) to review the current policy of prescribing the anti-fibrotic drugs nintedanib and pirfenidone. Many support groups were heavily involved in that campaign.

Anti-fibrotic drugs can prolong and improve quality of life for sufferers. In Europe, the USA, Canada and New Zealand, they are prescribed on diagnosis, but current guidance in the UK states that they should be prescribed only when a patient's lung function is within a certain range and may be stopped if lung function drops below that range. The present NICE guidelines recommend that those drugs should only be prescribed when lung function has deteriorated to between 50% and 80% capacity. Perversely, that strict criterion leaves many waiting for the inevitable time when their lung capacity has deteriorated further to enable access. I am told that patients in NI have resorted to purchasing the drugs privately at a cost of £5,000 per year. Many cannot afford that.

Following the campaign, which was supported by elected representatives across the devolved Administrations, NICE published a statement in May 2021, announcing a part review of existing guidance for both drugs. That review would consider the patient population not currently recommended to receive the drugs. There was great excitement and relief at the time of NICE's announcement. Hope was now on the horizon for many who knew that the drugs would greatly

improve their standard of living and prolong their life.

When NICE published its decision for a part review, we were made aware that it would last 50 weeks, with a lead-in time of three months for the NHS, meaning that a chance of being prescribed the drugs would not happen until at least autumn 2022. Disappointingly, the Northern Trust Pulmonary Fibrosis Support Group has learnt that the part review has not commenced, meaning further delay.

Since the announcement by NICE, Scotland has moved decisively. In June 2021, the Scottish Medicines Consortium approved nintedanib for use by NHS Scotland, making it available for the first time to an estimated 1,500 patients who are living with various forms of pulmonary fibrosis other than IPF. It is also looking at the policy for patients with IPF with a review that will take less than the 50 weeks announced by NICE.

I call on NICE to commence that review with urgency. Northern Irish and, indeed, other pulmonary fibrosis sufferers across the UK should not have to wait any longer for treatment that could enhance and prolong life.

Shirley McCay

Mr T Buchanan: I put on record the tremendous achievement of hockey star Shirley McCay from Drumquin, in the very heart of West Tyrone, as she calls time on her international career after an amazing 14-year spell at that level. When she was a young girl at Omagh Academy, Shirley's skills and talents on the hockey pitch soon began to shine through, earning her a place on the senior team. She was instrumental in making history on the Omagh Academy team, when, in 2005, it won not only the Ulster Senior Schoolgirls' Cup but the Kate Russell — All-Ireland Schoolgirls Championships. That was to be the beginning and the laying of the foundations for Shirley's international career.

From there, it was onwards and upwards for her. In 2007, at the age of 18, Shirley made her debut on the international stage. Since then, she has been instrumental in the green army's rise to success; a rise that brought them from obscurity to the elite level on the world stage and a journey that took Shirley to silver-medal level at her maiden appearance at the Tokyo Olympics. Having played 316 times, she holds the caps record for international hockey and has won numerous medals, trophies and cups throughout her career.

Although she is stepping back from her international career, Shirley will still play a key role in Ulster Hockey in her role as a professional coach, helping Ulster's young talent to develop their skills and play to their full potential on the hockey pitch. Just recently, she was part of the Ulster Hockey talent coaching staff, which saw Ulster win double gold at the UK School Games. She is an inspiration to all our young folk and hockey fans. We congratulate Shirley in her great achievements for Ulster Hockey, and we wish her well now in her coaching career as she strives to bring Ulster Hockey to a greater level on the international and world stage.

Economic Issues and the Consequences of Brexit

Mr O'Toole: I want to talk about some of the concerning local and global economic issues that face the people whom we represent and, indeed, the global economy. I also want to talk briefly about how those relate to some of the questions we will face in the weeks and months to come on dealing with the consequences of Brexit.

At the minute, we know that we are approaching a very difficult autumn and winter in terms of the cost of living. Although we hope that it will not be fully implemented in Northern Ireland because we have been campaigning against it, the likely removal of £20 a week from universal credit claimants will have a devastating impact, particularly on vulnerable people here. Furlough, the employment support that was a lifeline to lots of people throughout the pandemic, has come to an end. We do not know how that will play out or, indeed, how sustainable the economic recovery will be. More broadly, there is a cost of living crisis that is affecting families and households right now, from the most vulnerable people through to everyday, ordinary families. I am sure that Members have dealt with constituents who face, and, indeed, are facing themselves, the household costs of vastly increased gas prices. That is having a crippling effect on industry, but it will also have a crippling effect on many families who face a very difficult winter because of fuel poverty. We need to do more about that in the Assembly.

We also face the challenge of a broader crisis around inflation, rising prices and supply chain issues, some of which, particularly in Britain, have been exacerbated by Brexit and a shortage of drivers, but broader supply and inflation issues are affecting the European and global economies. We face a very vulnerable

winter. We need to work on all those issues, but that is a prelude to my saying that it is why we do not need anything approaching a confrontational, escalated dispute between the UK and EU over the implementation of the protocol.

I do not want to have a fight about this today, but we should all want — I think that, at heart, everyone in the Chamber wants it — to see solutions to smooth the consequences of Brexit and smooth the flow of goods under the protocol from GB into Northern Ireland. It looks like, later this week, the EU will announce proposals to that effect, which is wholly welcome. It should be easier to move those goods, and there should be measures to smooth that flow. At the same time, we want to protect the stability of our economy and, indeed, the dual market access that is a unique benefit to us in this place that gives us the ability to trade into both the British market and the EU single market. That will be an enormous benefit to us, and we need to maximise it while dealing with some of the consequences of Brexit.

Looking at some of the rhetoric over the past couple of days, everyone here should know that, given the very fragile global and local economic context, this place cannot be placed and does not want to be placed in the middle of a dispute, so I urge the UK Government to take the proposals from the EU seriously, get round and agree those solutions so that we can all move on to getting through the economic recovery.

Rare Disease Community

Ms Bradshaw: Following World Mental Health Day yesterday, I want to speak today about the rare disease community, which needs a clear voice at the Executive. That community lives with complex conditions, faces daily frustrations and challenges due to its small numbers and limited specialist health services and has undoubtedly been severely impacted by the fear, isolation and loneliness caused by the pandemic.

You do not need to look far in your circle of friends and family or, indeed, at colleagues or neighbours to find someone with a rare disease. Approximately 8,000 conditions have been identified to date. While the individual conditions are rare, when you add them all up, it equates to one in 17 people living with a rare disease. That is more than 110,000 people in Northern Ireland, yet diagnosis takes over five years on average and often a lot longer, with

typically three or four missed diagnoses along the way. There are also many that are undiagnosed. The rare disease community faces daily frustrations and challenges in Northern Ireland due to its small numbers and the limited specialist health services, as I said. Mental health problems are also common amongst that group, and they are often unaddressed due to the complexities of the psychological side of their conditions.

The restrictions due to COVID-19 have been difficult for us all, but consider the rare disease community, many of whom are in the "clinically extremely vulnerable" category — otherwise known as "shielding" — and have been in continual lockdown since March 2020. No matter what the experts say about relaxation measures, each patient with a rare disease is extremely fearful about how safe they will feel on re-entering society. As the roll-out of the booster begins, there is still uncertainty about the long-term protection offered by the vaccine and how long antibodies stay in the system.

In 2021, the inequity experienced by the community is unfair and avoidable. Let us work smarter together to reduce health inequalities for that community, remembering that it numbers over 100,000 people. In this case, rare is not so rare.

Council Workers' Pay

Mr Carroll: I want to raise the issue of pay offers for our council workers, who, like our health workers and Civil Service workers, are being made an offer that is unacceptable, below inflation and way below what they deserve. Let us not forget that, while most people were able to work from home to protect themselves and their families, the front-line work of council workers and many others, including retail workers and lorry drivers, kept our society functioning to some degree when everything else had ground to a halt.

Just imagine how unbearable it would have been for people who were working from home if there were no council workers to collect bins or clean streets. Just imagine people trying to have their daily walk or visit their local park or green space in the middle of lockdown without the park wardens to open the parks and make sure they were kept clean and in good condition. It is clear that, without the sterling and continued work of our council workers, the terrible experience of the pandemic would have been immeasurably worse. Of course, I should mention the other workers in councils who

answer phone calls, work in the community and play many roles.

We owe our council workers a lot for the work that they did and still do. They put themselves and their family members at risk by going out to work and interacting with the public during a deadly pandemic. What will not work here is thanks or pats on the back for those workers. We need to ensure that there is a proper financial uplift for all the workers who put their necks on the line for all of us.

12.30 pm

It is not only that. We are looking into a bleak winter and new year for everybody, unless, of course, you are wealthy. On top of pay cuts for front-line workers, the CPI inflation figure is sitting at 3.2%, and that is set to shoot up during the next few months. The RPI rate of inflation is sitting at 4.8% and is set to shoot up as well. When you add the scandalous National Insurance increase and the fact that gas and oil prices are shooting up, you see that more and more workers will be forced into poverty and debt and into the arms of food banks this winter. Workers have effectively had almost a quarter of their wage cut during the last decade, when they had to tighten their belts, while prices still shot up.

The suggestion that Governments, councils or employers have learned from COVID has, once again, proven to be a myth. Unions representing council workers — GMB, Unite, UNISON and others — are calling for an increase of no less than 10%, and that is what they deserve. A further insult is the fact that most councils here have chief executives or managers who are on hundreds of thousands of pounds per year, yet many council workers have just about enough to get by. We need to make sure that our council workers are not left in the cold this winter. If councils do not have a healthy surplus or deep financial reserves, the Executive must step in to protect workers. Current offers are unacceptable. We need to pay workers what they are owed and worth. The current offer does not do that, and it should be immediately taken off the table. A much improved and fairer offer should be made to our workers.

Four-Day Week: Pilot Scheme

Ms Dolan: There is a growing conversation across the world that strong economies can be built on giving workers a better work-life balance. Key to that conversation is the campaign for a four-day week, which is being

driven by businesses, trade unions and rights activists. The four-day week is a game changer for the labour market, as it would enable full-time workers to work four days rather than five days, without detriment to their wages. Wherever it has been carried out, there have been benefits for workers and employers through the delivery of a better work-life balance and increased productivity. Despite the well-documented benefits of a four-day week, our Economy Minister continues to fail workers and businesses by not supporting my continued call to establish a pilot scheme in the North. To date, I have called on three successive DUP Economy Ministers to carry out a pilot scheme, all of whom have refused. In that time, the Scottish Government and the Dublin Government have announced pilot schemes, while we continue to lag behind.

The reality of a four-day week is that it can enable workers to work smarter without having to work longer, and it could help to solve the long-term economic problems that we face in the North. Successive economy strategies mention that we need to tackle low productivity. However, there has never been any real focus on whether reducing working hours could improve productivity. The reality is that many workers, particularly in my constituency, face a long commute to work, which results in work-related stress and tiredness that inevitably reduce their productivity. Businesses in the North, such as JMK Solicitors, ICE Group and Elite Electronic Systems, already operate a four-day week, which has resulted in benefits for staff and their company. The four-day week also operates across a range of sectors, with a number of packaging companies embarking on it. In addition, social care providers have contacted me personally to express their interest in a pilot scheme.

Over 100 years ago, trade unions secured the right for workers not to work at the weekend so that they could have a well-earned break and feel refreshed when returning to work. There is a clear demand from workers and employers for a four-day week, and it is crucial that the Minister heeds those calls. I therefore call on the Economy Minister once again to fund research into a four-day week and to give businesses and workers the opportunities that are being afforded elsewhere.

Healthcare Staff Recognition Payment

Mr Frew: The Health Minister first announced in January that healthcare workers would

receive a £500 payment. At that time, the Health Minister stated:

"There are no words to properly convey what health workers have done for us, we will never be able to repay that debt".

I agree with the Health Minister. However, it seems that some healthcare workers have yet to receive their £500 payment, especially those in the independent care sector. I ask the Minister to make a statement to the House about when all those healthcare workers will get their £500. Given that they have not received that money, it looks as though they have been forgotten. The Assembly, the Executive and the Health Minister should in no way betray those people by making them feel as though they have been forgotten, considering the amount of work that they do for our loved ones and the most vulnerable.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the time for Member's statements. I invite Members to take their ease for a moment or two before we move on to the next item in the Order Paper.

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

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Plenary Meeting

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement. Before I call the deputy First Minister, I remind Members in the Chamber that, in the light of social distancing being observed by parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members who are participating remotely must make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members who are present in the Chamber can do so by rising in their place, as well as by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly.

I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. This is not an opportunity for debate, and long introductions will not be permitted. I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during a statement or in the period for questions afterwards.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): In compliance with section 52C of the 1998 Act, I will make the following statement on the twenty-sixth North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) plenary meeting, which was held on 30 July 2021 at the joint secretariat offices in Armagh and by videoconference. The First Minister and I have agreed that I will provide the report. The Irish Government were led by the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin TD, who chaired the meeting. The Executive were led by First Minister Paul Givan and me. All Executive Ministers, with the exception of Minister Swann, attended.

At the meeting, Ministers expressed their best wishes to all athletes from the island of Ireland who were competing in the summer Olympic Games in Tokyo and to those who, at that time, were preparing to compete in the upcoming summer Paralympic Games. The Olympics have now passed, but I take the opportunity to commend the athletes on their performances and to say how proud we are of every one of them.

The Council received updates on the NSMC meetings that had taken place since the

previous plenary meeting. They included meetings in the health and food safety, trade and business development, transport, inland waterways and education sectors. Ministers also noted that cooperation between the two Administrations continues across all the NSMC sectors and that further updates will be provided at future meetings. Ministers also noted that the intention is to return to in-person meetings of the Council at sectoral level, taking account of public health guidelines, as soon as it is safe to do so and that the joint secretariat will arrange future meetings on that basis. We also noted that an annual report on the work of the NSMC during 2020 had been published.

The Council was briefed on the current public health situation and the ongoing close cooperation in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ministers discussed the current position in the two jurisdictions, including progress on the roll-out of vaccines. The Council recognised the significant loss and challenges experienced by so many as a result of COVID-19. Ministers reiterated their appreciation to all those involved in responding to the pandemic, particularly front-line health and social care workers and those in the wider workforce who kept essential services and facilities operational.

We also recognised the impact of the pandemic on society and the economy, and we welcomed the measures put in place by both Administrations to support communities and businesses affected by the crisis and to assist economic recovery. Ministers welcomed the significant progress in the roll-out of vaccines, which has played a key part in the gradual reopening of society. The Council noted that the response to COVID-19 was considered at relevant meetings of the Council and that, where appropriate, sectors will continue to consider how agreed collaborative approaches can contribute to the promotion of economic and social recovery from the pandemic.

Positive developments in the delivery of New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitments were noted. Specifically, they included noting that the interim report from the Planning Appeals Commission on the delivery of the A5 Western Transport Corridor was published on 16 March 2021, together with the Department for Infrastructure's response to all the recommendations made by the commission.

It was noted that both Administrations continue to work together to progress the Ulster canal restoration project, for which the Irish Government provided funding of €12.2 million through the Shared Island Fund, and the rural

regeneration and development for phase 2 of the project from Clonfad to Clones. It was noted that substantial completion of the main infrastructure work is expected in 2023. Ministers also noted that the approval of €1 million of funding from the Shared Island Fund has enabled the acceleration by Waterways Ireland of phase 3 pre-development work to the point where three substantive subsections will be brought forward for funding approval later in the year. It was noted that the Ulster canal greenway, which covers a 22-kilometre section of greenway along the route of the disused canal from Smithboro in County Monaghan to Middletown in County Armagh is progressing and that an application for planning permission has been submitted for the Monaghan to Middletown section.

The Council noted the joint launch of the all-island strategic rail review by Ministers Ryan and Mallon in April 2021. Ministers noted the commitment of €3 million from the Irish Government's Shared Island Fund to bring the Narrow Water bridge project to tender stage on the basis of existing design plans and reiterated the priority that both Administrations attach to that project.

The NSMC noted that the Department of Transport is progressing the review of air connectivity and that it has engaged with project stakeholders, including representatives from Cork Airport, City of Derry Airport, Dublin Airport and the two Belfast airports, as well as with the Department for the Economy and the Department of Transport. Substantive analysis has been completed. The review documentation is being prepared and will consider regional connectivity, sustainability and climate change.

Ministers noted that work is being undertaken by Leitrim County Council and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council to take forward the development of the Sligo to Enniskillen greenway as a joint project. That will include the issuing of a tender for technical consultants in April.

The NSMC asked that senior officials from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department for the Economy continue their cooperation and outreach to stakeholders around higher education provision in the north-west region. Ministers noted that discussions on all-island research hubs are ongoing between all stakeholders, including the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Department for the Economy, Science Foundation Ireland (SFI)

and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and that there was broad agreement on thematic priorities. The Council noted the commitment of €40 million from the Irish Government's Shared Island Fund for a new five-year North/South research programme to foster collaboration between higher education institutions across the two jurisdictions.

The Council noted that a statement of updated strategic priorities for the north-west region has been submitted to the NSMC by Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council to inform the ongoing engagement by both Administrations with the north-west strategic growth partnership. Ministers noted that discussions on arrangements for a further phase of the north-west development fund are under way, that an additional allocation of €1 million will be provided by the Irish Government this year to extend the current phase of the fund and that consideration is ongoing in relation to arrangements for a second phase of the fund.

The Council agreed that New Decade, New Approach commitments should remain on the agenda of relevant NSMC sectoral meetings and that further updates will be provided to the Council at future NSMC plenary meetings.

The NSMC recalled that both the Executive and the Irish Government noted draft programme proposals for a PEACE PLUS programme prior to the launch of a public consultation on the proposals. Ministers noted that a public consultation on the draft programme was held by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) from March to May and that it received over 400 responses. The exact quantum of the PEACE PLUS programme has yet to be finalised, but it is expected to be in excess of €1 billion. The final detailed programme proposals will be submitted for approval to both Administrations, the European Commission and the Council at the earliest opportunity.

12.45 pm

The Council considered a number of corporate governance matters in respect of North/South implementation bodies. The Loughs Agency 2020-21 business plan, which has been completed in accordance with agreed guidance issued by the Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and agreed by sponsor Departments and Finance Ministers, was approved, and the 2021 budget/grant provision of £5.147 million was recommended.

The Council agreed that the term of appointment for the post of chief executive of

the Loughs Agency will be permanent. The Council also approved Tourism Ireland's 2020-21 business plan and recommended the 2020-21 core budget/grant provision, reflecting the change to the established ratio for 2020-21. In addition to that, Ministers approved the revised 2020-21 business plans for both agencies of the North-South Language Body and recommended the revised budget provision for Foras na Gaelige and the Ulster-Scots Agency for 2020-21.

The Council noted the process for the recruitment and subsequent appointment of a chief executive officer for Foras na Gaelige, subject to already established NSMC and Finance Department procedures, and approved the interim arrangements that will be put in place to manage the business of the agency in the event that a candidate is not in post before 2 December 2021.

Ministers also agreed the terms of reference for an independent organisational review of the Special EU Programmes Body.

A number of appointments were made to the boards of North/South bodies. Ian Doherty and Conor McGuinness were appointed to the board of Foras na Gaelige for the period 30 July 2021 to 29 July 2026. Mr McGuinness is to serve as vice-chairperson of the board for the period up to 29 January 2024. The Council also appointed Trevor Wilson to the board of the Ulster-Scots Agency for the period 13 December 2021 to 12 December 2026. Nóirín Hegarty was appointed as director of the board of Tourism Ireland, a company limited by guarantee, and as vice-chairperson of the board for the period from 19 December 2021 to 18 December 2026. Alan Lewis was appointed to the advisory board of the Food Safety Promotion Board for the period 30 July 2021 to 29 July 2026. The Council also appointed Danny Kennedy to the board of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission for the period 30 July 2021 to 29 July 2026.

The Council approved an indicative schedule of future NSMC meetings and agreed that the next NSMC plenary meeting will be held in December 2021.

That concludes the statement, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, deputy First Minister. We move on to a period of questions.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): Thank

you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I welcome the statement from the joint Ministers on the NSMC meeting in July.

Before asking a question, however, it would be remiss of me not to highlight the fact that future meetings are imperilled because of the inability in the Executive Office to make appointments to attend the meetings. Once again, it is a further example of the joint nature of the Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister and the dysfunction that continues in that Department. One cannot act without the other and, on this occasion, one's refusal to act hinders the rest of us.

There is a lot in the statement and much information about the delivery of infrastructure projects, including the A5 western transport corridor and the Narrow Water bridge in my constituency. In the COVID recovery plan, there was a commitment to an infrastructure commission, which would undoubtedly help with the delivery of these projects and others. Will the Minister provide us with an update on the infrastructure commission and detail whether there are any delays to appointments to the commission and where those delays come from?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before the Minister answers, it took one minute and one second to get that question out. I appreciate that Mr McGrath is the Chairman of the Committee and he gets that degree of leeway. However, other Members will not.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for his question. I support the infrastructure commission. I have made that clear to the Minister. The Minister for Infrastructure has been engaging Executive colleagues to find a way forward. I hope that that is successful. When we look towards the future and the challenges that we face, investment in infrastructure will be crucial for our recovery and planning. I referred to a number of big, exciting projects in the statement, and we can do many more things. I hope that we can get progress on the infrastructure commission as quickly as possible.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an leasChéad Aire as a ráiteas ar maidin. I thank the joint First Minister for this statement. Will she agree that the North/South ministerial bodies are an integral part of the political institutions of the Good Friday Agreement, along with the Assembly and the Executive, and that the boycott by the DUP of those bodies

serves only to undermine that agreement and does a huge disservice to the electorate here in the North?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. Yes, I absolutely agree. It undermines not only the agreement but delivery on crucial key projects. No party here has the luxury of cherry-picking or choosing which parts of the agreement they wish to operate. All three strands are equally important, and North/South cooperation is fundamental, not least to get action and progress across a whole range of issues. We have the PEACE PLUS programme, which I referred to. That is £1 billion worth of projects on the ground. That is a lot of employment and a lot of investment in our areas, and that is in jeopardy because of the DUP's stance. Also, there was an announcement last week by the Irish Government on increased investment in the Shared Island Fund, and, again, that is all in jeopardy because of political posturing and electioneering by one particular party. That has to stop. We are here to do business, but that means that you have to work every part of the agreement. I am certainly committed to power-sharing, and, likewise, I expect that others bring that same approach. The boycott needs to end.

Mr Buckley: The deputy First Minister will know that the inability for the North/South Ministerial Council to meet is a direct result of the Northern Ireland protocol. So, does the deputy First Minister accept that her actions, alongside those of colleagues in this House who called for the rigorous implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol and who rubbished east-west relations and rubbished unionist concerns, have meant that the current North/South ministerial institutions can no longer be sustainable? Deputy First Minister, you, alongside colleagues, have called for the rigorous implementation of the protocol. Own this arrangement. You can help to provide a solution by calling for the replacement of the Northern Ireland protocol.

Mrs O'Neill: First, if the Member wants to talk about ownership, let us talk about who owns Brexit. Let us talk about who acted against the best interests of the people here. It was the DUP that helped to deliver Brexit. It was the DUP that rejected every form of Brexit. It was the DUP that helped to deliver the hardest possible Brexit. Therefore, the rest of us worked to find solutions and mitigation of the worst excesses, and therein lies the protocol.

There are pragmatic solutions to be found around some outstanding issues around the

protocol, but start injecting a wee bit of honesty into your contribution and be honest with the public. The protocol will remain. There are issues that need to be resolved, and let us find solutions. I hope that there is progress later this week. I hope that, when the EU sets down its proposals for the areas where we all want to find solutions, they are embraced by your party and by the British Government. For the business people, the farmers and everybody in the economy here who is desperate for some certainty and stability, I hope that we get to that point. I am hopeful about that happening in the week ahead, but let us not play games, electioneer and talk to the party faithful. *[Interruption.]* The protocol will remain, and, I hope that, collectively, through the mechanisms that were agreed in the withdrawal agreement, the Joint Committee is the forum through which we can find solutions.

Mr Buckley: You called for rigorous implementation.

A Member: You called for Brexit.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The deputy First Minister has given her answer. We do not need chuntering from a sedentary position from either side of the House.

Mr Stewart: I thank the deputy First Minister for her statement. Deputy First Minister, you referred to the PEACE PLUS initiative, and it has been claimed in the press that up to £1 billion could be lost if this is not signed off by the end of October? Is that the case, and, if it is not, what are the time constraints? Can you spell out the impacts if that money were to be lost?

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks for the question. Yes, the DUP's actions are putting at risk £1 billion worth of investment across a whole range of areas. We need to have the NSMC meeting that is due to happen later this month. That is the forum and the vehicle for which to clear this paper. The Finance Minister has submitted to the Executive our paper, and it has been signed off on the Irish Government side.

There is one barrier to progress here, and it needs to be removed because we need to see the funding delivered on the ground to key organisations. At this moment in time, many of them are unsure about keeping their staff on and the certainty of their projects into the future. All those things are in jeopardy. We are talking about important money that will be invested in our communities, and the delays need to stop.

We need to see things progressed, and we are running out of road in our ability to do that.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, deputy First Minister, for your statement today. I will focus on paragraph 7, which talks about the briefing you received on the close cooperation in the response to the pandemic. Will you give some specifics on what that cooperation looks like now? Was there any discussion about what it will look like in the future?

Mrs O'Neill: It was a more general briefing on our joined-up approach. We talked about where we were with the vaccination roll-out at that point in time, and, obviously, things have changed between then and now. The Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) engage on a weekly basis; I believe that is still the case. There is engagement at a ministerial level, and there has been engagement at North/South Ministerial Council level.

We will have plenty of time in the future to reflect on how coordinated and joined-up we were and whether that was effective enough throughout the pandemic. There will be plenty of time for an analysis of that. However, because the conversation at the meeting was more broad-ranging, it was more about how we need to be as joined-up as possible. In particular, it was about looking toward the future and recovery and at how we could work collectively on recovery when coming out of COVID. We will face all the same societal and economic challenges across the island and, indeed, across these islands, so there is a lot of scope for us to work together in the future.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will the joint First Minister agree that the DUP ministerial boycott of North/South Ministerial Council meetings is hampering the progress of government?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member. Simply: yes. In recent weeks, a number of meetings have been cancelled. The North/South Ministerial Council meeting on agriculture and languages was prevented from going ahead because the DUP literally did not turn up. The deliberate blocking of business by the DUP represents a serious failure to comply with the law and the ministerial code. I will not go into that matter, because, obviously, as we speak here today, court proceedings are under way. We await the outcome of that.

People cannot play politics with the Good Friday Agreement. You do not get to pick and choose which parts you will work. Either you

embrace it and work with others, or you do not. In this case, the DUP is refusing to do that. We await the outcome of the legal challenge, and then we will decide on the next steps. I encourage all Members who are committed to working together and delivering for the public to work together, and that includes attending North/South Ministerial Council meetings, British-Irish Council (BIC) meetings, the Assembly Chamber and the Executive, because the totality of relationships is crucial.

Mrs Dodds: Anyone looking in on the ministerial statement would be absolutely right in thinking that, somehow or other, Sinn Féin is divorced from reality in that it stopped all North/South Ministerial Council meetings for three years when it pulled down the Assembly.

The deputy First Minister talks a lot about the balance of relationships in the Belfast Agreement. The Belfast Agreement created a careful balance of relationships North/South and east-west. Will the deputy First Minister agree that the protocol has shredded that balance of relationships, particularly in our trade with GB, and has added costs to businesses in Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: We have a protocol as a direct result of Brexit — the Brexit that you and your party championed. It is the hardest possible Brexit, which you and your party championed. I encourage the Member to work with those who are trying to find pragmatic and reasonable solutions to the outstanding issues. There are ways through, and that is through what was agreed. The British Government signed up to the protocol. Your party was part of that arrangement, so let us find solutions.

The business community here does not want waffle or nonsense; the business community wants certainty and stability. It wants us to find solutions and a way forward. I hope that, later this week, when the EU puts its proposals on the table, that is worked through and we have a Joint Committee meeting as soon as possible, as that is the forum in which to resolve the issues. Instead of posturing publicly in press statements and all the rest, let us settle on solutions. That is what I am trying to do.

1.00 pm

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, when the report of the independent investigation into mother-and-baby homes and Magdalene laundries was published last Tuesday, you spoke of the incomprehensible pain and trauma inflicted on

the women and girls who went through those institutions. You acknowledged that mothers had their babies taken from their arms and moved without consent across and between jurisdictions. Do you agree that, in dealing with the issue of mother-and-baby homes, we require a joined-up, all-island approach and that the NSMC would be an integral part of that?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. I agree absolutely about the need for that connected, joined-up, all-Ireland approach, particularly on this sensitive issue. I raised the issue of mother-and-baby homes at the NSMC meeting back then. As you referenced, things have changed in that we now have the report. I commend the panel for the work that it did to get us to this point and, crucially, the victims and survivors for their input into that work.

There is a clear North/South element to this. It is really important that we are joined up here because the practices in those institutions, whether it be forced labour, forced adoption or abuse, happened across this island. We all know and can recount many stories of mothers having their babies removed from their arms and moved across jurisdictions without their consent. That means that we need to be joined up. We need to see maximum coordination and alignment on these issues, particularly when it comes to records. The sealing of records is crucial if victims and survivors are to get the full information and the complete story about what happened to them, which they have been denied for so long. Church and state need to be held accountable. On the sealing of records in particular, the Executive and the Irish Government need to work together to show that we are listening and will take action together.

Mr Clarke: Deputy First Minister, in your statement, you referred to the PEACE PLUS finance and how it could be signed off or otherwise, given the actions that this party has taken to try to prevent the most rigorous implementation of the protocol. I am not sure that I will get an answer to this, given that you seem to be suffering from political amnesia, but how was that dealt with during the three-year hiatus that your party caused?

Mrs O'Neill: The PEACE PLUS programme is in jeopardy because of the actions of your party. PEACE PLUS funding of £1 billion — much-needed investment — is in jeopardy because of the actions of the DUP. The political stability of the Assembly and Executive is under threat because of the actions of the DUP.

Mr Clarke: The three years when you pulled it down [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Excuse me one moment. The Minister must be heard.

Mrs O'Neill: Alongside that threat to investment, we had the announcement last week of the Irish Government's national development plan. They have redoubled their financial commitment, through the Shared Island Fund, to many projects. Again, that is under threat from the DUP. You can explain to the wider public why you are threatening investment in our communities and why you are threatening major investment projects across our society.

Mr McNulty: Joint First Minister, thank you for your statement. I welcome the reference to the summer Olympic Games and the summer Paralympic Games and the commendation of the athletes at those games. They deserve it; they did us proud. However, above commendation, what is the North/South Ministerial Council doing to ensure that all athletes of all abilities have access so that they can participate in and shine in organised sports regularly?

Mrs O'Neill: Of course, the North/South Ministerial Council is not the forum at which to discuss the details of how you would respond to support athletes. That would come under the relevant Departments on this island. I am sure that the Member will want to write to the relevant Ministers to raise that. Of course, we want to support our amazing athletes as best we can, particularly when it comes to their training, access to facilities etc. The NSMC was merely noting the success and wishing all the athletes well. Obviously, time has passed, and the Paralympic Games have now also happened. The Minister for Communities will hold a reception for the athletes, and I am sure that Members will be invited to that.

Dr Aiken: I note that you talk about the €3 million that the Irish Government have committed to the Narrow Water bridge project before it goes to the tender process. Have the First Minister and deputy First Minister asked whether there has been a proper investment appraisal of that project, bearing in mind the significant increase in the cost of raw materials and the fact that what the people of Newry really want is a relief road?

Mrs O'Neill: First, the Narrow Water bridge project will facilitate cross-border active travel. It is an excellent project that has been in the ether

for such a long time, so I am glad to see some progress being made. There is also the further development of the greenway network and local connectivity. It is not either/or. There is a lot of scope for us to do really good things.

I welcome the €3 million in funding and the fact that the project will move on to tender stage, with the potential for further funds being made available for construction. We also know that the local councils — Louth County Council and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council — are working closely with central government to progress the project, and there is ongoing engagement. We also know that consultants have been appointed by Louth County Council to work towards the development of a detailed tender. Much progress has been made, and I want to see that built on. There is huge economic potential from that investment.

Mr Delargy: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will the Minister give us some detail on the cooperation so far between the Executive and the Dublin Government?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member. As he will know, the NSMC gives us a really good platform for Ministers to agree the outworking of the Shared Island Fund and take forward important North/South commitments that were agreed in NDNA. In practical terms, we are talking about projects such as the A5 western transport corridor, which is an Executive flagship project and a priority for the Executive. The Government in Dublin remain in close contact regarding the schedule of their contribution to that project. Also, as was just referred to, we have the connectivity and enhancement through the Narrow Water bridge project, the €3 million that has been brought forward for that project and the fact that it is moving to tender stage. The Executive and the Irish Government have worked together to support the delivery of the north-west development fund, which, I know, the Member will certainly be interested in. That commitment goes as far back as 'A Fresh Start'.

There is also good news about enhancing and growing higher education provision in the north-west. Officials will continue to work closely with both the Magee and Coleraine campuses of Ulster University and the Letterkenny Institute of Technology. They will develop substantial proposals to address the commitments that were made in NDNA in relation to higher education provision in the north-west, and a draft proposal will be available shortly that will facilitate a shared analysis and a review by the relevant Departments.

Also, phase 2 of the Ulster canal project will benefit from the Shared Island Fund and the rural regeneration and development fund, which was awarded the €12.2 million estimated cost of the project. Alongside that, you have the all-island rail review and the air connectivity review. As you can see, there is a huge volume of work going on across all of those areas. It is so important that we are committed to sustaining and growing that work in the period ahead.

Mr Chambers: The statement paints a rosy picture of North/South cooperation with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. Will the deputy First Minister confirm that, for example, the reality of the Republic's unacceptable delay in providing track and trace data on international arrivals in Dublin airport heading into Northern Ireland has meant that the people of Northern Ireland have not enjoyed the cross-border cooperation for dealing effectively with a virus that they expect and deserve? Will she confirm that the blame for that difficulty lies with Dublin and not Belfast?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member has perhaps asked me that question before. If it was not him, I apologise, but I think that he asked me that before, and, at that time, I said clearly that, where there were barriers or problems, those needed to be resolved. As opposed to apportioning blame, I am more interested in trying to find a solution, and I welcome the fact that solutions were found across those areas. I also welcome the fact that the travel picture has slightly changed somewhat since then.

As I said in answer to another Member, there will be plenty of time for reflection on how effective the North/South cooperation was in response to the pandemic. I certainly have my criticisms of it, but I also point to some strengths. There will be plenty of time for analysis of all of that. In such matters, I try to find solutions to problems as they arise.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for her statement. Does she agree that David Frost's recent remarks at the Policy Exchange think tank event at the Tory party conference, which referred to growing all-Ireland trade as a problem to be solved, well and truly expose the British Government's cynical and duplicitous nature regarding the protocol?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member. She refers to David Frost's comments. You would be forgiven for thinking that he was not the man who negotiated the protocol on behalf of the Tory Government. His description of growing all-

Ireland trade as a problem to be solved is absolute nonsense. It is ludicrous. It is also another demonstration, if one were needed, that Brexit is about ideology, which takes precedence over the economic success of our economy in the North of Ireland.

The growth in all-island trade is a direct result of the post-Brexit trading arrangements. There were always going to be new trading realities in a post-Brexit world. This very British Government negotiated what we are discussing today. The commentary exposes how big a failure Brexit is. Members across the Chamber know that the protocol was put in place to mitigate the worst impacts of the hardest possible Brexit, to prevent a hard border on this island and to protect North/South cooperation. At a time when there have been empty shelves and fuel and labour shortages across Britain, we have been somewhat insulated from some of the difficulties because we have the protocol, and some local businesses have made that comment publicly.

My focus is on protecting the livelihoods and well-being of all our people. I encourage the British Government not to raise tensions and dial up the rhetoric but to work with the EU throughout this week to find solutions that guarantee simplicity, flexibility and stability. That is most important and will maximise the opportunities that we have been afforded as a direct result of the protocol.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for her statement. She referred to the importance of close cooperation in our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Does she agree that we need to learn the lessons from having a fragmented approach to public health and that what we now need to see is greater cooperation and partnership between both Departments on the island as we step our way through the pandemic?

Mrs O'Neill: I absolutely agree. I picked up on some of that a bit earlier. There are, of course, lessons to be learned from how we have dealt with COVID. There is no doubt that communication in particular could have been much better at times — that is just a fact — but there is also no doubt that having two health systems on the island presents its own challenges. As a former Health Minister, I firmly believe that we are yet to realise the potential that all-island coordination will bring, not just in response to an emergency situation such as a pandemic but for prevention. It is so important that we continue to explore that cooperation further. The practical outworkings and benefits of all-island cooperation can be seen

particularly in health, whether that be the North West Cancer Centre at Altnagelvin or children's cardiac care. There are many brilliant examples of all-island cooperation, and I want to see a lot more of that potential realised in the time ahead. It just makes sense.

It takes political leadership to explore meaningfully how we can work better together and design a more modern health service through which we can work together on prevention. That is what people need. It is about meeting the needs of the public at large, whether they live in Tyrone, Cork, Galway or Wexford. Now is the time, as we step out of the pandemic, to be ambitious and aspirational about our health service. In speaking about health and our response to COVID, I say again that our health service's biggest asset is our healthcare workers, to whom we owe such a debt of gratitude. I want to support them in the time ahead, because they talk constantly of the pressure that they are under. Let us work to protect our healthcare workers, but let us also be ambitious for our health service and for people's outcomes in the future.

1.15 pm

Mr Catney: Thank you joint Minister for your answers so far. The money that is going into the NSMC will drive tourism in the canal structure. I speak to businesses all the time, and not one has said anything to me or whispered a concern about the authority of the European Court of Justice in respect of the governance of the protocol. Minister, do you agree that the jurisdiction issue set out by the party opposite, which seems to have lifted the ball and run off with it, was a British nationalists' Brexit concern and that they should not play fast and loose with the Good Friday Agreement?

Mrs O'Neill: We are all here as a direct result of the Good Friday Agreement. Power-sharing came about because of the Good Friday Agreement, and no one has the luxury of cherry-picking which parts they wish to work. We have to work faithfully — North/South, east-west and on our relationships in the North. That is very challenging at times, but it is absolutely worth the effort. We all need to double down on our efforts. I encourage those threatening the stability of politics, the future of the institutions and the much-needed investment in our communities to desist.

Mr McGuigan: Given the climate emergency that we are in the midst of, with its devastating local and global impacts, it was good to see the

joint First Ministers and an Taoiseach attending the event on Friday that was jointly hosted by the two Chambers of Commerce on the island. Does the Minister see merit in a joined-up, all-Ireland approach to the climate emergency?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. We know that climate does not recognise any borders, as I stated when we attended the Chambers of Commerce conference. The First Minister, the Taoiseach and I all spoke at that, and the two Chambers of Commerce spoke jointly. It was a good initiative for them to come together to discuss not only the challenges but the opportunities that exist. It was a very healthy conversation.

The fact that heads of Government came together to have that conversation makes a clear statement about the seriousness of our approach and our shared thinking on how we move forward. We will be most effective in our efforts to tackle climate change by working together, North and South. There are significant opportunities through that approach. We have to exploit our location and our geography as an island to harness the enormous sustainable and economic potential that that offers us.

We also have a part to play in the global response. We can best achieve that by developing a joined-up, all-island approach that encourages, supports and incentivises more sustainable practices, that sets zero emissions targets and, most importantly, takes the action needed to achieve them. Everyone on this island has a part to play in the response, and I hope that the NSMC becomes a key platform that allows us to advance that work.

Mr O'Toole: It is often said that, since Brexit, we have had significant disruption in the east-west movement of goods. It is also true that most North/South activity has been affected by Northern Ireland leaving the single market for services and, in fact, by Northern Ireland leaving the single market for everything but the movement of goods. That affects everything from cross-border healthcare provision to financial services to the ability of professional organisations to employ people in one jurisdiction or the other. Was that discussed at the NSMC plenary meeting? If not, why not? What work is being done at NSMC level to address the very difficult effect of North/South services divergence as a result of Brexit?

Mrs O'Neill: As the Member knows, the plenary meeting is the culmination of all the sectoral work across the six sectoral meetings. That is where the detail of those things is gone into. I

have no doubt that that was a more detailed conversation, and I am very happy to ask the secretary to provide you with any detail of the conversations. The plenary discussion of Brexit and its implications was at the macro level. I absolutely concur with you on the outworking of a lot of things that perhaps do not get media attention all the time but are real challenges that we will have to face in the years ahead as the direct result of Brexit being imposed on us.

Mr Allister: Does the deputy First Minister take unionists for fools? They would be fools if they went back to a North/South body while east-west continues to be trashed. Does she not appreciate that the answer lies in the EU giving up its ill-gotten sovereignty over Northern Ireland? Unless and until that is done, mere tinkering will not work. That is the requirement for restoring stability and normality.

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, I hope that later this week we will find solutions to some of the outstanding issues that have arisen as a direct result of the implementation of a protocol that was necessary to stave off the worst excesses of a Brexit that the Member championed. I welcome your language of stability and certainty, because that is certainly where I want to get to. That will not be done by shouting from the sidelines; it will be done by being in the room, having conversations, ironing out the issues that need to be ironed out and finding solutions, which is absolutely possible.

I encourage the Member to inject a little bit of honesty. The protocol is here. There are issues that need to be resolved, and we will work our way through those via the Joint Committee. I encourage the EU and the British Government to work together fruitfully when the proposals are put on the table this week and to find that stability and certainty that our businesses, our farming community, our manufacturing sector and wider society want.

Mr Carroll: Minister, there is a lot of concern about how restrictive and cumbersome employment legislation is in the North and the South for trade unionists, which restricts their ability to organise and take action. Was there any discussion about that? NDNA made some commitments about workers' rights but only one has progressed to the House. Learning from COVID has not happened for workers and trade unionists.

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in a previous answer, there was a progress report on the NDNA commitments. There will be a further progress report, and I am happy to keep the Member up

to date on progress, particularly around employment rights and workers' rights. We need to get to the point at which we have delivered on all the political commitments that were made in the New Decade, New Approach deal.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before we move on to the next item of business.

Private Members' Business

Period Products (Free Provision)

Bill: First Stage

Mr Catney: I beg to introduce the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill [NIA 39/17-22], which is a Bill to secure the provision throughout Northern Ireland of free period products; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Arts and the Creative Industries

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that, due to illness, the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, is unavailable to respond to the debate as planned and has sent her apologies to the House.

Mr Nesbitt: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges the importance of the arts and creative industries sectors, both to life in Northern Ireland and to our local economy; recognises that an estimated 8,000 people are employed within the arts and creative industries sectors, many of whom are self-employed; further recognises the pressure that has been felt by the sectors as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; and calls on the Minister for Communities to work in collaboration with other Executive Ministers to deliver a 10-year strategy for the arts and creative industries, which sets out cross-cutting priorities, develops excellence and delivers long-term allocation of funding.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes to wind up the debate. As an amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List, the Business Committee has agreed that 15 minutes will be added to the total time for the debate.

Mr Nesbitt: It gives me great pleasure to commend the motion to the House. I acknowledge the amendment that has been tabled by colleagues in the Social Democratic and Labour Party. I see no great injury in the amendment, but I will do its proposer the respect of listening to the argument before we come to the vote.

I have some declarations of interest to make. My 24-year-old son Christopher is a professional musician. He graduated with a very good degree in commercial music, only to find, within a year, that he was hit by the COVID implications. His two income streams of live performance and teaching dried up as if somebody had flicked a switch. The Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre estimates that between 12,000 and 16,000 people are in the same position and are vulnerable as a result of the impacts of COVID-19. That represents more than 60% of jobs in museums, galleries and libraries, and almost half of the jobs in music, theatre and the visual arts. I also declare that I am an office-bearer on the all-party group on arts and creativity, which is chaired by Clare Bailey, and I chair the all-party group on sport and physical recreation, which may get a mention as we go along.

The motion is about two things. First, what sort of society do we want to build? Secondly, can arts and creativity help to deliver on a Programme for Government? In terms of the sort of society that we want to bequeath to our next generations, it seems that our priority, whatever our constitutional preference, has to be to make Northern Ireland work. That could be measured in, for example, the quality of our public services, not least health and education, but also the prosperity of our people. We can have a broad definition of "prosperity" that goes beyond what is in your bank account and includes how you feel when you wake up in the morning and your sense of good physical and mental health and well-being.

I do not think that anybody can name me a civilisation that has flourished without cherishing the arts. I do not want to live in a society that is purely functional. I want to live in a society that is inspiring, aspirational and, frankly, joyous. The arts have a critical role to play in delivering on that. Can the arts also deliver on a Programme for Government? I believe that they can. I was talking, over the course of the weekend, with a friend who, in recent times, has had a very serious challenge from cancer, including a long spell in an acute hospital. We discussed the difference between waking up in that hospital ward with walls that are simply painted beige and walls that have art hanging from them. The fact is that, if there is art, it is stimulating. That stimulation not only aids recovery but can speed it up, thus releasing an acute bed for the next patient more quickly than if there were no art involved.

Can the arts help young people? I will range my remarks over a decade or so. In 2010, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport

(DCMS) in England released a report on the impact of engagement with culture and sport, including a review of the impact on young people. It found that participation in the arts improves academic attainment in secondary school-age students. It could increase the academic scores by, on average, 1% or 2%. It could improve preschool and primary school-age children's early literacy skills and increase the cognitive ability test scores by, on average, as much as between 16% and 19% above that of non-participants in art, all other things, of course, being equal.

1.30 pm

What about health and well-being? They, of course, are at the core of our draft Programme for Government and at the centre of plans for the 11 councils. We all seek truly vibrant communities where people will want to live and work and that are needed in order to ensure that people's lives are happier and healthier. We agree that participating in or attending a cultural event has a positive impact on mental health and well-being. In fact, there is a survey that says that those who attended a cultural event or place in the preceding 12 months are 60% more likely to report good health. The power of culture and the arts to unite people during lockdown has been captured in a report by the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre and the Intellectual Property Office (IPO). That report shows that the amount of creative content being consumed across the UK is at an all-time high during this lockdown. It also shows that involvement in community arts helps to counter the effects of bereavement. Think of the many quilts, which, I am sure, every Member has seen, that have been put together by relatives of loved ones who were lost during our Troubles. Arts projects can, of course, also reduce isolation amongst older people. A recent Thrive and After the Interval survey of over 6,500 audience members showed that the well-being aspects of attending live events is what people missed most during the lockdown for COVID-19. I am arguing that the two aspects of creating the sort of society that we want and delivering on the Programme for Government are not separate; they overlap, are intertwined and can come forward together.

It is a matter of regret, of course, that, as we come into the final half year of a five-year mandate, our current Programme for Government has the word "Draft" stamped on every page. It does, however, have 12 high-end outcomes, and I suggest that the arts and creative industries can help to contribute to no fewer than seven of them. Outcome 1 states:

"We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy",

and that speaks to the SDLP amendment. Outcome 3 is:

"We have a more equal society";

while outcome 4 is:

"We enjoy long, healthy, active lives".

Outcome 5 is :

"We are an innovative, creative society, where people can fulfill their potential ".

Outcome 6 is:

"We have more people working in better jobs".

Outcome 10 is:

"We have created a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest";

and outcome 12 says:

"We give our children and young people the best start in life".

The arts and creative industries is a big sector. According to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI), 7,500 people are employed in the 102 organisations that it funds annually, but the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre says that the number of people working in arts, culture and heritage is 39,100. According to the Department for Communities, in 2013, the creative industries contributed £797 million to the economy. That is 2.4% of Northern Ireland's total gross value added.

I come now to the figures. If you flick through the annual reports of the Arts Council over the past 10 years, you will see consistent reporting of the amount of money that has been handed out in grant and aid to artists and artists' organisations. Ten years ago — the financial year 2010-11 — it was £26.5 million; the following year, it was down by £9 million to £17.5 million; halfway between then and now, 2015-16 and 2016-17, it was less than £10 million per annum; and the most recent figure, which is for 2020-21, taking out the COVID money of £22 million, is £10.79 million. Ten years ago, it was £26.58 million. If you go on the Bank of England reckoner, you will see that, in today's money, that £26.58 million is worth £34.5 million. It should be £34.5 million today

just to stand still, but it is down to £10.79 million.

I understand that the Minister is absent through illness, and I wish her a speedy recovery. I acknowledge the letter that she wrote to me about bringing forward the motion. We are asking for an embedding of the arts in the next Programme for Government and a proper cross-cutting initiative between the Departments of Communities, Education, Economy, Health and Justice. In her letter, the Minister stated:

"The motion calls on me to work in collaboration with the rest of the Executive in developing a new strategy. I have no difficulty in committing to such an approach".

I thank her for that, and I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Durkan to move the amendment.

Mr Durkan: I rise in support of the motion —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is just "beg to move". *[Laughter.]*

Mr Durkan: I beg to move the following amendment:

Insert after "priorities,":

"recognises explicitly the existence of regional inequalities in relation to funding allocations from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and addresses existing regional disparity as an aim in the strategy,".

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. You will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak in the debate will have five minutes.

Mr Durkan: Apologies, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I was getting a bit ahead of myself. I rise to support the motion and to propose the SDLP amendment. Like Mr Nesbitt, I regret that the Minister is unable to be here. We send our best wishes to her for a swift recovery.

In the face of the pandemic, the value of our arts and creative industries has been brought into sharp focus. Over the past year and a half, many have realised the immense value of the arts in our daily lives. Where would we be without the welcome distraction of

documentaries, binge-watching series, reading books or listening to music? Yet, the purpose of the arts sector is more than just its physical or final product. It is about bringing people and communities together. Perhaps that is why this small corner of the world is so richly blessed with such creative talent — no one can argue that we do not punch above our weight on the world stage — and why it is so desperately needed. The arts are a great healer during difficult times, not only as a form of escapism but as a medium for shared experiences. They have the magic to make one feel not quite as alone in their place in the world. Their value and the role that they play in people's lives is incalculable. Yet, there is no denying that the arts and the creative industries have been among the hardest-hit by the pandemic, its restrictions and its impact on livelihoods.

I welcome the motion and thank the Ulster Unionist Party for highlighting the ongoing struggle for thousands of individuals who are employed in the sector. Many of them are self-employed, making them most vulnerable to the adverse consequences of the past year and a half. Eight thousand is the frequently cited figure of people who are employed in the arts industry here. However, that refers only to those who are employed by organisations that are funded by the Arts Council and fails to paint the bigger picture — for want of a better expression — of just how expansive employment is in the sector. The number of people who work in the arts, culture and heritage sector in Northern Ireland is actually closer to 40,000. Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre estimates that the pandemic made between 6,000 and 12,000 of those jobs vulnerable. That represents 60% of jobs in museums, galleries and libraries and nearly half of those in music, theatre and the visual arts. Some 129 organisations surveyed by the Arts Council reported the loss of 36,000 work opportunities for Northern Ireland artists and creatives between the start of lockdown in March 2020 and September 2020. The Christmas period and the year in between will have added to that significantly.

When we think of the arts, we think of the performers, but that is just one aspect; that is the final product, so to speak. Evidently, there is a whole supply chain, including stage managers, make-up artists and lighting and sound technicians, who have been unable to work or generate income during the past year and a half. I argue that those ancillary services in the arts sector, which are vital and integral to it, will be dealing with the most adverse impacts of the COVID pandemic. For the sector, that period not only hit harder but was felt much

earlier than March 2020, with gigs, events and opportunities cancelled long before COVID-19 arrived on our shores in its full devastating glory. The likelihood remains that its impact will be felt for much longer, making an efficient and sufficient recovery framework for the sector so important. In 2019 alone, the arts generated over £10 billion across the UK, and it is worth bearing in mind that the arts sector is the fastest-growing sector economically in the North with regard to job creation and tourism. It should be treated as such in terms of Executive investment.

There is no denying that COVID support from the Executive was too slow. The Executive received £33 million in Barnett consequentials in July 2020, but the process to distribute £29 million of that did not begin until September, and it took up to Christmas to actually be delivered. We only have to look at counterparts elsewhere to see how that should and could have been done. Germany acted extremely early, taking measures in March 2020 to ensure that events and performances were replaced with digital versions. It earmarked €50 billion in support for the arts and cultural sector for freelance artists and creative SMEs, together with many other measures, such as access to basic insurance, support for families with children and tax relief. Clearly, other countries value their arts and creative industries, supporting them not only to survive but to thrive throughout the pandemic, whereas what had we here? The UK Government ran a campaign telling Fatima the ballet dancer to retrain and go for a job in cyber. They pushed individuals to rethink and reskill, effectively giving up on our artists and creatives. I want to clarify that my criticism of our response is in no way a criticism of staff in the Department and the Arts Council, who worked hard to get the money out where it was needed.

Turning to the SDLP amendment, no conversation about the arts sector would be complete without recognition of the regional imbalance — particularly, though not exclusively, in the north-west — in relation to funding allocations from the Arts Council. It has been widely acknowledged that investment is concentrated in Belfast. That is understandable. Artists flock towards and live in urban settings; we know that. However, more and more money is being ploughed in to organisations in Belfast that are deemed too big to fail, and that is actively discriminating against smaller arts groups outside of that geographical sweet spot. ACNI funding for 2020-21 highlighted that clearly, with Belfast allocated over £22 million of funding, whereas the Derry and Strabane area received a fraction of that at just £3 million. That

is in no way proportionate to the amount of activity going on in both settings. The second city, and first City of Culture, demands and deserves its fair share. As I have said, I am cognisant that that imbalance is not isolated to the north-west, but the figures are stark nonetheless. There can be no more gaslighting on regional inequity.

On the subject of the City of Culture, we also wish Armagh well in its bid and hope that lessons have been learned from the Executive's failure to build adequately on the success of Derry's year in 2013 with investment and legacy.

It is clear that historical regional imbalance is not simply a theory but a reality that has been explicitly and unequivocally accepted by the Minister and the chief executive of the Arts Council, Roisín McDonough. Earlier this year, following engagement with the Derry City and Strabane District Council business and culture committee, chaired by my colleague Rory Farrell, they agreed that disparity in investment existed and acknowledged a structural problem that needs to be addressed. The Minister gave her commitment to tackle inequality as a key consideration of the renewed culture and arts strategy. To be fair to my erstwhile constituency colleague Martina Anderson, she did much to bring that to the fore. Now is the time for action on that commitment to move beyond rhetoric and to ensure that arts organisations and communities feel the benefit of those promises.

Ultimately, as Mr Nesbitt said, greater investment must be secured overall for arts and culture in order to address systemic regional imbalances. I appreciate that the Arts Council is hamstrung, given its finite resources. However, that does not excuse regional disparity to date.

Tackling regional inequalities must be at the core of all strategies going forward, as must the model of co-design, which will provide the best guarantee of fairness. As such, I ask that my party's amendment be supported. Mr Nesbitt touched on the arts sector's economic value. I am sure that others Members will go into that in more depth. As well as recognising the wider societal value of arts and culture in our communities, we must see the economic value.

1.45 pm

Ms Á Murphy: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the motion. The arts and creative industries sector is an integral part of society in the North of Ireland, both socially and economically. The sector is the heartbeat of

many of our communities. The North is home to a wide range of creative arts and industries. Throughout the past number of years, some worldwide TV series have been recorded here. Shows such as 'The Fall' have also highlighted the top-class actors that we have in the North.

When the COVID-19 outbreak came about in March 2020, the Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, instructed the Arts Council to ensure that 50% of the £12.9 million in annual core grants that it had received from the Department was paid up front to support roughly 100 key organisations in the sector. Unfortunately, COVID-19 shut down our economy, which resulted in many artists losing work. Arguably, the arts and creative industries sector was one of the hardest hit. Many of the people employed in the sector are self-employed and rely on the hospitality sector to ensure their income. Cultural venues and events were among the first to close in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and among the last to reopen. In my constituency, on 18 August, the Ardhowen Theatre in Enniskillen put on its first show since the outbreak of the pandemic, albeit to a reduced capacity.

The Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre (EPC) estimated that, of the 39,000 jobs in the arts, culture and heritage sector, 12,000 to 16,000 were vulnerable as a result of the pandemic, which equated to around 60% of jobs at risk. If we try to put ourselves in those people's shoes, we can imagine the stress and uncertainty that that would have caused to many people's lives, yet it was those same artists who kept people's spirits high during the tough and difficult times through performing gigs online that were streamed in many households across the North.

As interim Minister, Carál Ní Chuilín was able to secure £29 million of the £33 million arts and heritage funding that came our way from the Barnett consequential from Britain for the arts, culture, language and heritage. Carál was then able to deliver £5.5 million for the arts and culture sector through the creative support fund, which consisted of vital funds, such as the organisations emergency programme and the individuals emergency resilience programme. That was done in two tranches. First, there was £1.5 million for individuals and small to medium-sized organisations. A further £4 million was then announced to boost the recovery for musicians, performers, freelancers, and arts and culture venues. That funding was crucial to allowing freelancers and the creative sector to continue to prepare and to adapt to new ways in which to work during the crisis.

The first round of funding from the organisations emergency programme provided support for over 150 organisations. From 2020, the Minister and her Department allocated an additional £38 million to support those sectors and individuals detrimentally impacted on. Since March 2020, over £10 million has been allocated to the individuals emergency resilience programme, a fund that was established to help support local artists in the creative industries, such as DJs and freelancers. In addition, in September 2021, Minister Hargey launched a £5 million fund to retain skills in the creative sector. That will provide a grant of up to £2,000 per individual who has been impacted on by COVID-19. That will hopefully prevent the loss of the talent and expertise of individuals and freelancers who work in the sector.

The culture, languages, arts and heritage sector has been disproportionately impacted on in the 2021-22 Budget. The Executive have provided £13 million to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic, and, in May 2021, Minister Hargey established a culture, arts and heritage recovery task force, the role of which is to consider measures to support the reopening and recovery of the culture, arts and heritage sector and to pave the way for a long-term strategy for that sector. We believe that that task force is crucial in ensuring that our arts and creative industries sectors can begin to thrive and flourish once more.

One of the key points that must be addressed is multi-year budgeting for the Arts Council. That will allow for greater security for organisations and individuals to plan without second-guessing whether they will receive their funding.

Ms P Bradley: I, too, pass on my best wishes to Minister Hargey and wish her a speedy recovery.

We talk in the Chamber quite frequently about inequalities, and there is no doubt that the arts, culture and heritage and creative sectors have been disproportionately impacted on by the pandemic. We know that they are primarily demand-driven, and, therefore, COVID-19 pulled the rug from right under their feet with deeply alarming consequences. The effect of the pandemic on those sectors was not uniform, and, therefore, a long-term strategy for recovery and renewal cannot adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. It needs to be targeted and evidence-based to ensure that those who are most at risk see the primary benefits. Over 7,500 people are employed by organisations that are funded annually by the Arts Council, and over 6,000 of those are employed on a

temporary or freelance basis. Granting added protection and security to those workers must be a key consideration in any strategy moving forward.

We cannot look at the situation in Northern Ireland in isolation. Other jurisdictions and Governments face similar threats to institutions such as museums. There is a need to identify examples of best practice to ensure a sustainable and exciting future for the arts and creative industries. The absence of a strategic approach to funding for the arts has severely dented what could be achieved in that sector over recent years. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland saw an almost 40% reduction in its funding between 2011-12 and 2018-19.

I agree with Mr Durkan that any strategy that we come up with also needs to focus on regional inequalities and the opportunities presented by the arts and creative industries, and that must also include bridging the rural/urban divide. We also need to bridge the socio-economic gap. I am a Belfast representative, and I absolutely want to see as much funding as possible going into Belfast, but I absolutely get that there are inequalities throughout the country. I ask the proposers of the amendment to recognise that some funding that goes into Belfast is for the likes of the Ulster Orchestra, which is Northern Ireland-wide and is there for all of Northern Ireland. In recognising that some of that funding is Belfast-centric, we should also acknowledge that it is there for the entire community in Northern Ireland.

I am also a member of the all-party group on the arts, and that group has discussed how we need a long-term strategy and that, under that strategy, we need to hold all Departments to account on how they progress the arts. We know, through the Department for the Economy, how vibrant and exciting the creative industries are and how much we have to offer here in Northern Ireland. We want that to continue.

Just last week, I had the opportunity to attend an awards ceremony with the Newtownabbey Arts and Cultural Network, which offers training in the arts and creative industries in Rathcoole. We all remember that, during the summer, we had disturbances in and around Belfast to do with the protocol. That group decided to run a diversionary scheme, and it was all to do with the arts and creative industries. We saw how that group was able to take those young people away from getting involved in those disturbances. Many of those young people were not involved, but the scheme took them away

from inner Belfast to work in the arts and creative industries in other places.

We have seen how the arts can be used in so many different ways and how funding the arts can, as Mr Nesbitt said, help people's lives. It promotes good health and good mental health. We therefore need to look at how we can help the many young people out there who are interested in having a career and getting involved in the industry, which, we know, has so many facets. We need to put in place everything we can in order to keep those young people in Northern Ireland and let them see that it is an up-and-coming place when it comes to the arts and creativity. We are getting there, but we need that extra push. A long-term strategy, along with our longer-term Budget, would go some way towards promoting that and ensuring that, going forward, this is the very best place to be. We need to lead from the front for everybody involved in the arts and creative industries.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Given that it is now after 1.55 pm and Question Time is due to start at 2.00 pm, Members should take their ease from this debate. The next item of business will be questions to the Executive Office. When we return to this debate, the next Member to speak will be the Member for Strangford Ms Kellie Armstrong.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Historical Institutional Abuse: Redress Process

1. **Ms Brogan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the development of terms of reference for the review of the historical institutional abuse redress process. (AQO 2541/17-22)

Mr Givan (The First Minister): Officials are engaging with victims and survivors groups on the terms of reference for the review of the historical institutional abuse (HIA) redress process. The junior Ministers met two of the victims and survivors groups recently and reassured them that the forthcoming review would be victim-centred. We have given an undertaking that the victims and survivors representative groups will have an opportunity to see and comment on the proposed terms of reference before they are put to us for approval later this month.

Ms Brogan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he also detail the latest figures that have been produced regarding the level of redress payments that have been made to date?

Mr Givan: By the end of September, 2,006 applications had been received by the redress board. Determinations totalling £28.1 million have been made, and £24.1 million has been paid out in redress.

Mr Stewart: Given the fact that non-state institutions were at the heart of many of those awful stories of historical abuse, and without prejudicing the findings of any report coming forward, does the First Minister envisage that any legal enforcement of financial penalties can be imposed on those institutions by way of redress?

Mr Givan: Later this week, on Thursday, we will meet with representatives of six of those institutions, and we will have exactly those discussions.

Ms Bradshaw: The mother-and-baby homes panel report was launched last week, and one of its recommendations was the swift introduction of a redress scheme. Have conversations begun in the Minister's Department around amalgamating the two schemes?

Mr Givan: The deputy First Minister and I, along with the Health Minister, met the expert panel and that work is being analysed by the interdepartmental working group, which is chaired by Judith Gillespie, who is independent of government. That work is being taken forward, and we discussed it at the Executive last week. We have asked for the assessment to be brought forward to Ministers and for the Executive to urgently look at the next steps in the process. I hope that we will be able to do that some time in November.

Mr Nesbitt: Has the First Minister given any thought to a proposal that I put on the table some time ago, which is that, in order to take some strain off the public purse, the institutions that should be contributing to redress could pay a lump sum up front, which could be refunded if it is too much?

Mr Givan: I welcome the fact that those payments are being paid and at pace. The panels that are carrying out the assessments continue to expedite that as quickly as they can. The payments that are associated with this redress scheme are being paid. We are having discussions with the institutions later this week about their contribution. In the next phase, the expert panel will look at the mother-and-baby homes and the Magdalene laundries, but the issue of redress is one that we need to address. The Member's point about the institutions is well made.

NDNA: TEO Commitments

3. **Mr Dickson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether their Department will implement all of its New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitments by the end of this mandate. (AQO 2543/17-22)

Mr Givan: We are committed to delivering all the Executive Office's NDNA commitments and to moving on those things that have been delayed. Our Department has made good progress in a number of areas, including provision of support for victims and survivors of historical abuse, the conduct of Executive business and the European Union's exit subcommittee.

Mr Dickson: I am delighted to hear the First Minister say "all" because, to date, one might describe the Executive Office as somewhat embarrassed by the paucity of legislation that is being brought through the House. In fact, we are at the end of the mandate and are seeing more private Member's business and private Member's Bills being debated in the House than business being brought forward by the Executive Office and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Will they up their game and guarantee that all the commitments that were made in New Decade, New Approach will be delivered before the end of the mandate?

Mr Givan: The Executive Office has been incredibly busy making sure that all the Departments that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have to oversee in their role on the Executive unlocked a whole series of legislation on a range of issues at the end of June, not least of which were the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill, for which the Minister from the Member's party is responsible, and the Organ and Tissue Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill. The Executive are taking forward many other Bills. If any Member looks at the Assembly's legislative programme, they will see that it is overwhelmingly led by the Executive. Of course, I also welcome private Members' Bills, not least my own, for which Christopher Stalford has taken on responsibility.

Ms Sheerin: Given that New Decade, New Approach was the basis on which these institutions were restored, does the Minister agree that the public have a right to expect it all to be delivered?

Mr Givan: When we look at all the NDNA commitments, we see that one that is critically important is the recognition and implementation of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the internal market. That is one of the commitments the United Kingdom Government entered into and was the basis on which my party entered into these institutions. That needs to be put right, so I agree that all of NDNA needs to be implemented.

Dr Aiken: I noticed that an NDNA commitment was about a lot of issues to do with dealing with the challenges identified by the renewable heat incentive (RHI) inquiry. I also noticed that, in his written statement last week, the Finance Minister referred to a lot of the things that are to be implemented, yet we have already seen correspondence from senior civil servants from as far back as December 2018, saying that actions were to be taken. Is that acceptable?

Also, I welcome the new Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I have just seen you. You are very welcome to the House.

Mr Givan: The Finance Minister provided a written statement to the Assembly outlining the Executive's response to the RHI inquiry report. Also in response to the report, the Assembly took forward the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which was led by the Member for North Antrim and supported by my party. The Assembly and the Executive have been responding to the findings in the report on the RHI inquiry.

Mr Speaker: On a welcoming note, I call Deborah Erskine.

Mrs Erskine: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Will the First Minister detail what progress has been made on the NDNA commitment to increase police numbers?

Mr Givan: I, too, welcome Deborah, the new Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, to the House. Deborah is a good friend of the family, and I am delighted that she has taken up the role of serving the people of the great constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. My family are more from the south Tyrone end of that constituency, but it is a pleasure to have Deborah here, taking up her role in this House. I welcome her.

The Member is right that the commitments on policing, which were put forward by my party, are a key part of NDNA. In respect of their implementation, in order to get us back up to 7,500 police officers, the budget had an in-year allocation of £12.3 million, £9.8 million of which will enable the police to retain their numbers at the current level of 7,000. The additional £2.5 million enabled the recruitment of 100 more officers. That is a step forward in reaching the NDNA target of 7,500. To get us to that target, this party will want to see that reflected in the budget for the following three years.

Mr Allister: Given that the First Minister's party returned to Government only on the basis that, as promised in NDNA, Her Majesty's Government would legislate to restore Northern Ireland's full position within the internal market of the United Kingdom, which has not happened, will he give us an update on his party's leader's promise that, if it does not happen in October, his party leader will resign him as First Minister, along with his colleagues?

Mr Givan: The Member knows that, as a result of actions taken by the Democratic Unionist

Party, we have now got to a place where the European Union recognises the harm that is being done by the rigorous implementation of the protocol that most of the parties in the Assembly called for. I welcome the fact that people recognise that the protocol is not working and that change needs to be made. Of course, some people's assessment of change will likely differ from the assessment that my party will take of what comes forward.

I look forward to the proposals from the European Union later this week and to seeing how the United Kingdom Government respond to them. Let us get to a place where there are no longer any east-west barriers. That is interdependent with the North/South relationship, and I look forward to us getting to that place.

Interface Barriers: Removal

4. **Mr G Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on progress to remove interface barriers under the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) strategy. (AQO 2544/17-22)

Mr Givan: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I ask junior Minister Middleton to answer this question.

Mr Middleton (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): The Department of Justice leads work on the interfaces programme, which is one of the seven headline actions under the Executive's Together: Building a United Community strategy. Over recent years, the number of Department of Justice-owned interface structures has reduced from 59 to 43. A number of other structures have been reduced in nature, and the opening times of interface gates have been extended to reduce the significant impediment that such structures present to local people. The Executive remain committed to working towards the reduction and removal of all interface security structures, and we look forward to seeing more progress in that area.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will the Minister detail the total level of investment that has already been allocated under the Together: Building a United Community strategy, which he mentioned in his answer?

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for his question. The agreed 2021-22 Executive Office budget includes funding of £12 million in total

for good relations. The T:BUC strategy has the target of removing all interface structures by 2023. This year, a further £600,000 has been allocated towards the removal of all interface barriers. In total, over £6.3 million has been allocated across the T:BUC headline actions. A wide range of programmes contribute to progress on the interfaces. The Department will continue to progress this as we move into the new mandate.

Mr McNulty: Will the Minister provide an update on the future funding of T:BUC, given the uncertainties?

Mr Middleton: As I said, the Executive Office budget includes £12 million for good relations. We continue to progress the T:BUC strategy. As we move into the Budget debate and look towards supporting good relations, that is very much at the forefront of our minds. Obviously, work remains to be done, particularly around the interfaces. The Department will continue to secure additional funding for that, if possible, in line with other commitments.

Commissioner for Victims and Survivors: Appointment

5. **Ms Dolan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on when the new Commissioner for Victims and Survivors will be appointed. (AQO 2545/17-22)

Mr Givan: The deputy First Minister and I were pleased to announce the launch of the recruitment competition for the post of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors on Monday 27 September. The closing date for applications is noon on Friday 15 October. The commissioner will have an important role in ensuring that victims and survivors are supported. We encourage all those who have the relevant skills and experience to apply. We expect the interviews to take place during the week commencing 15 November and the new commissioner to be in post by early 2022.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for that update. Will he also confirm whether any progress has been made on the British Government honouring their responsibilities to help fund the victims' pension?

Mr Givan: Given that that is a financial matter, the Finance Minister has been leading on it on behalf of the Executive. He continues to engage with the Treasury and make the case for contributions to be made from there, as a result of the outworkings of the scheme. Undoubtedly,

the changes made the scope of the scheme much wider than had been initially envisaged. I do not disagree with that decision. Decisions were taken by the Secretary of State and passed by Westminster, and that has enlarged the scope of the scheme. It is right that London makes a contribution towards making those payments. I welcome the court ruling that made it clear that payments need to be made to victims. That money is being paid and will continue to be paid, in line with that ruling.

Mrs Dodds: Last week, the Victims and Survivors Service published a survey of victims' attitudes. Some 88% percent said that it is important to address the legacy of the Troubles and 70% said that they are opposed to the central plank of the Secretary of State's proposal, the statute of limitations.

However, in addressing the legacy of the Troubles, will the First Minister agree that it is also extremely important to ensure that the Republic of Ireland addresses its legacy of the past, particularly the allegations of collusion between Garda forces and the Provisional IRA?

2.15 pm

Mr Givan: The Member raises a very important point, one that, I know, she has campaigned on for many years and on which she recently led a debate in the Assembly. It is right that, in providing access to truth for victims, the Republic of Ireland Government need to ensure that information that they hold — information that has been sought by victims and their families — should be provided. Indeed, we have had evidence, not least in the Smithwick tribunal, that spoke of the collusion that took place between gardaí and the Provisional IRA in those incidences. The Republic of Ireland are not bystanders when it comes to dealing with the past. There are very much people who were engaged in it and who need to provide information to the victims who require it.

Mr McGrath: If the person takes up their post in January, that will have been 16 months since there was last a person in place. Will you agree that you owe an apology to the victims and survivors sector for leaving them so long without a voice?

Mr Givan: What is critical is that the functions of the office have continued to be discharged. We have a process now in place to fill the vacancy that has been there, but, in the absence of having a Victims' Commissioner in place, important work has continued to be developed. It is vital that victims get that

support. I am pleased that we have now been able to provide support through the payments. I will update the House on that: by 10 October, 691 applications had been received. Whilst I accept that there has been an absence of a Victims' Commissioner, that in no way has prevented the functions of that office from carrying on.

Mr Nesbitt: I put it to the First Minister that there is one function that has not been able to carry on because of the absence of a Victims' Commissioner, and that is with regard to appointments to the Victims and Survivors Forum.

Mr Givan: The Member will know more than most about the important work of the forum. Appointments can be made only by a commissioner. Under previous commissioners, an action plan had been established for the replenishment exercise to take place. That could be used, if it is acceptable to the new commissioner. Obviously, that will be an issue that the commissioner, on appointment, will want to take forward.

High Street Task Force

6. **Mr Gildernew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the planned high street task force co-design and stakeholder engagement process has begun. (AQO 2546/17-22)

Mr Givan: Mr Speaker, with your permission, junior Minister Middleton will answer the question.

Mr Middleton: I know that Members and their constituents share our goal of high streets that are thriving places for people to do business, socialise, shop, be creative and use public services, as well as, of course, being great places to live. The high street task force is chaired by junior Minister Kearney and me. As members, we have met people from across government, business, academia, professional bodies, trade unions and, indeed, the community and voluntary sectors. That has been identifying challenges and considering solutions to continue to make our high streets, towns and villages thriving and sustainable places.

The key themes and issues have been identified, and comprehensive engagement with stakeholders is currently being worked up and will commence later this month with a call for evidence. We will seek the widest possible engagement and sharing of views and

experiences when the call for evidence gets under way. The findings from the call for evidence, together with other data, will inform a draft report and recommendations that will be subject to full public consultation and equality considerations before a final report is presented for agreement by the Executive by spring 2022.

Mr Gildernew: I also welcome my fellow constituency MLA Deborah Erskine to the Assembly, and I look forward to working with her on behalf of all of the people of our constituency.

In that respect, Minister, I am sure that you will join me in welcoming the fact that the high street voucher scheme is finally under way. Do you also agree that longer-term strategic support is needed to revitalise our high streets sustainably and properly?

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for that question, and, of course, I join him in welcoming Deborah Erskine to her place. I wish her well in representing the people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

I completely agree with the Member about the high street voucher scheme and the specific issues that it has, particularly relating to the Department for the Economy.

I am confident that the members of the high street task force will do their work. When we bring forward the report, I am sure that it will be sufficient not only in looking at the long-term benefits of the high street voucher scheme but in ensuring how we reinvigorate our high streets in the future.

Mr Dickson: Does the Minister recognise that speed is also of the essence when it comes to revitalising our high streets? While I appreciate that a task force will have a longer-term job and role to perform, our high streets are under extreme pressure now, particularly with utility costs.

Mr Middleton: Speed is always important, but, at the same time, it is important that we get our actions right. The high street task force met on 8 September, and we will meet again on 20 October. It has a long-term focus on addressing the pressing need to transform our high streets in response to fundamental, societal and economic changes; indeed, as Mr Dickson mentioned, it is very much a long-term project. That transformation will not happen overnight. Significant work has already happened to get us to this point. The call for evidence will launch soon. It will provide an opportunity for people to

have their say and will be an essential step in bringing to life the vision and seeing the results at street level.

Mr Stewart: The junior Minister will know of my passion for town-centre regeneration. I shared that with him during our time on the Committee for the Economy, and we had many discussions on the issue. As the Member for East Antrim said, it feels as though many of our independent retailers are on their knees. Many of them are looking at the task force as the last-ditch hope to save our town centres. Given how long it will take, what can be done in the interim, through collaborative working with councils and others, to keep the wolves at bay from the businesses in town centres that are really under pressure?

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for his question, and I agree with him. In recent years, Departments have implemented programmes in our town and city centres to improve their attractiveness not only as places to shop but as places to work, socialise and invest in. The Government have been investing in our town and city centres for decades through regeneration programmes. New issues have emerged, however, and those have had significant impacts that need to be addressed.

Funding has been approved to provide the secretarial support for the high street task force, and that will be located in the Department for Communities. At this stage, before Ministers have agreed the high street task force's final report and recommendations, it is too early to envisage what further funding will be required. It is important to note that, under COVID recovery, COVID-19 revitalisation funding of £19.3 million has been allocated to councils to enable support for a wide range of schemes, including physical interventions such as streetscape improvements, signage and dressing, as well as access and connectivity.

Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme: Applications

7. **Mr M Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many applications have been made to the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme since it opened. (AQO 2547/17-22)

Mr Givan: First, I reiterate that we are pleased that the scheme has now opened for applications. It is hoped that the opening of the scheme will have a positive impact on all who have suffered permanent disablement. As of 10 October this year, I can confirm that there have

been 691 applications received to the victims' payments scheme for permanent disablement since it opened for applications on 31 August this year.

Mr M Bradley: I also welcome my colleague Deborah Erskine to her place as a new Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I wish her all the best for the future.

I ask the First Minister what consideration will be given to applicants without the required medical evidence, given the fact that record-keeping then was not as thorough as it is today and applicants may find it difficult to get such evidence. The application form asks for medical records and press reports of the event as evidence. Many doctors and consultants have since retired or passed away, and many local newspapers may not be with us for much longer. Can the Minister look into that for me?

Mr Givan: The Member raises an issue that many of the groups involved in the development of the scheme have raised with our office. When people present for the medical assessment to establish the need that exists, it is vital that that be done with sympathetic understanding. People should not have to go through a process when it is absolutely clear that their need is obvious. The Member has raised an important issue to which we have been very much alerted.

Ms Ennis: Will the Minister provide an update on the latest projections for the overall cost of the victims' payment scheme?

Mr Givan: The costing of the scheme was calculated through the pension system that exists around any assessment. The estimated total cost of payments ranges from £600 million to £1.2 billion, the central estimate being £248 million before administration costs are added. We will not know the cost for certain until we have received all the applications. At this stage, these are estimates, but the figures should crystallise when there is a much clearer understanding of the volume of applications.

Mrs Dodds: I return, again without apology, to the survey of victims and survivors. Around 76% of victims and survivors who were surveyed believed that their views were known within the suicide prevention strategy, but very few believed that their views were heard within the anti-poverty strategy. Victims and survivors indicated, First Minister, that policy champions in Departments would be useful. Some such champions, for racial equality etc already exist. Will you and the deputy First Minister take that

forward as a matter of priority for victims and survivors?

Mr Givan: During the development of the scheme, there was extensive work with a wide range of organisations representing victims and survivors. That was a key part in how the scheme was set up. The Department of Justice carried out the administrative work of establishing the panels. A lot of information that we were able to glean through the work of the victims and survivors informed that process.

The Member makes a critical point: when government is developing such a scheme, it needs to be victim-centred. The victims need to have a key role in developing that process. Ultimately, we are seeking to provide the best possible support for them, so their voice must be heard.

EU Citizens: Proof of Status

8. **Mr Sheehan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on discussions with the Scottish and Welsh Administrations regarding proof of status for European Union citizens here. (AQO 2548/17-22)

Mr Givan: The EU settlement scheme is an excepted matter. However, we recognise the valuable contribution that EEA citizens living here make to our economy, culture and wider society. We know that the situation with status can be confusing for EEA citizens, employers and service providers alike. It is essential that those citizens can demonstrate their status easily when necessary. We wrote, with Ministers from Scotland and Wales, to Kevin Foster, a Minister at the Home Office, to urge that the current digital-only proof of status be supplemented with a form of physical proof. We await a response.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that EU citizens continue to play a vital and positive role in our society and economy, and that they should be treated with fairness and respect?

Mr Givan: I agree with the Member about the vital contribution that they make to our society and, indeed, our economy. It should be noted that while the applications of citizens who applied to continue to live in Northern Ireland are under consideration, their rights are fully protected.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Allister, and the Member will not have time for a supplementary.

Political Stability

9. **Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of whether the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland is affecting the political stability of the Stormont institutions. (AQO 2549/17-22)

Mr Givan: The Member will be aware that there are differing views across all parties on the Executive on the merits of EU exit and the protocol. However, we are united in our desire to seek the best possible outcome for our citizens and businesses. As an Executive, we continue to regularly discuss issues relating to European Union exit and to represent our positions in our engagement with the United Kingdom's Government and the European Union.

Mr Speaker: Supplementary, Mr Allister.

Mr Allister: Will the First Minister agree that it is untenable, given the nature of the protocol as a Union-dismantling instrument, imposing the partitioning of the United Kingdom and imposing checks because the rest of the UK is regarded as a third country, for any unionist Minister to continue to implement the protocol, and that, if that is the price of Stormont, is that not a price that no unionist could pay?

Mr Givan: Mr Allister has been reading my leader's speeches very well when it comes to wanting to address these issues.

We are clear: the UK Government Command Paper set out the issues that the protocol has now inflicted upon the people here in Northern Ireland. That has been reiterated lately in Lord Frost's contributions. I recognise the European Union and acknowledge its recognition of the harm that that is causing. We await the detail of its proposals and the outcomes of the negotiations between the UK Government and the European Union. At that stage, my party will make an assessment of the outworkings of those negotiations as to what is in the interests of Northern Ireland, but we are fundamentally of the position that the New Decade, New Approach commitment entered into by the UK Government on Northern Ireland's place in the internal market must be fully respected. That means removing the barriers created by the protocol on an east-west dimension.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That ends the period of listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

NSMC Meetings: Unlawful DUP Boycott

T1. **Ms Dillon** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the First Minister's response to the High Court ruling, which issued in the past hour, that DUP Ministers are acting unlawfully in their boycott of meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC). (AQT 1651/17-22)

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for her question. Obviously, we will read through the judgement that has been passed in the courts and provide a more detailed response to that in due course. I will make the point that, when it comes to the working of the North/South institutions, my party has made clear that we wish to see all parts of the Belfast Agreement upheld, but they are interdependent and interlinked, and the east-west dimension has been trashed as a result of the protocol. It is regrettable that that is having a knock-on effect on the North/South institutions. My focus is on having those issues resolved so that all parts of those institutions can function normally. However, the protocol has fundamentally undermined the basis on which the Belfast Agreement set up those various strands.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for his answer. In light of the ruling, can you confirm whether you will ensure that DUP Ministers now attend NSMC meetings in compliance with the law, particularly given that we will potentially have a loss of £1 billion? That is essential money for our communities in relation to health, education and economic development at any time, but that finance is particularly essential coming out of a pandemic. Will you give us some assurance that DUP Ministers will now attend NSMC meetings in line with the law?

Mr Givan: My party is very focused on resolving the issues that have created that impasse: the protocol and the undermining of our east-west relationship and the interconnection with various bodies that flow from the Belfast Agreement, including the North/South bodies. I want to see those issues resolved; that is what our party is focused on.

Universal Credit: October Monitoring Round Bid

T2. **Mr Durkan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister supports the allocation of resources in the October monitoring round to reverse the cut to universal credit. (AQT 1652/17-22)

Mr Givan: The Executive discussed that issue, and the deputy First Minister and I have taken action on it by joining our counterparts in Scotland and Wales in asking the UK Government to reverse their decision. On the back of the most recent Executive meeting, we will be corresponding on behalf of all Ministers in the Executive to communicate that the withdrawal of the £20 uplift is unacceptable; it should not have happened. We want the uplift to be reinstated. That is the position that we will articulate to the Treasury.

Mr Durkan: I thank the First Minister for his answer. I appreciate his commitment to resolving the issue, but I asked specifically about the October monitoring round. We are aware that the Communities Minister has made a bid for £55 million to reinstate that lifeline to struggling families and individuals out there. Will the First Minister commit to prioritising that issue in the Executive and to working with colleagues, particularly the Communities Minister, to identify a mechanism that will ensure its swift reinstatement?

Mr Givan: The Member raises a very important point, and, if we were able to find the additional funding that would be required through October monitoring, that would indeed be the mechanism. The payment was made through the Department for Work and Pensions. Northern Ireland does not have the systems to do that. The Member is right to ask what the mechanism would be.

Departments have not released significant amounts of funding in the October monitoring round; indeed, the amounts are negligible. The Department of Health has bid for £240 million. Through the Barnett consequential, we are due to get funding of £180 million that flowed from the additional spend on the health service in England. Given that the Department of Health has bid for £240 million and that we will receive £180 million, the question is this: will the finances will be there? Even if they are, it will be challenging for the Executive to have a mechanism for paying the money.

We need to be honest with the people who receive that money. It is vital for them. Nobody underestimates the harm that its removal will do to those people, but we should not make false promises or raise hopes. Creating false hope

would be particularly unfair, given the vulnerability of the people involved.

Dual Market Access: Opportunities

T3. **Mr McAleer** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on discussions that the Executive Office has had with business leaders on the opportunities for dual market access. (AQT 1653/17-22)

Mr Givan: That goes back to the issue of the protocol. Those who advocated the protocol presented it as giving us the best of both worlds. That is simply not the case. The UK Command Paper shows the displacement of trade that had been but is no longer flowing east-west. The protocol has had an impact on the supply chain. If the Member wants to articulate the advantages of having access to the single market, he needs to be able to address the disadvantages. They far outweigh any advantages of dual access that the Member seems to believe the protocol provides.

Mr McAleer: Does the Minister not agree that the protocol has provided us with a unique opportunity to access both markets? Invest NI recently provided information that up to 30 foreign direct investment (FDI) companies are now looking at the North as an opportunity. Does the Minister's party's opposition to the protocol not fly in the face of business leaders who want to seize the unique opportunity of access to both markets?

Mr Givan: I say to the Member that the number of checks required, which is nowhere near the level that it would have been had the grace periods not been extended — we would have been looking at around 25,000 common health entry document (CHEDs) checks taking place a week — is wholly disproportionate to what is required to protect the integrity of the European single market. The Member would do well to encourage those in the European Union to recognise that harm is being caused and that solutions are needed so that we can avoid the disadvantage that the protocol has placed on the people and businesses of Northern Ireland.

Amnesty Proposals: Assembly Opposition

T4. **Mr Gildernew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in the light of recent comments by NIO Minister Conor Burns, to reiterate the Assembly's opposition to the

British Government's amnesty proposals. (AQT 1654/17-22)

Mr Givan: My party does not support the NIO's tabled proposals or what they are trying to achieve. We have made it clear that victims should be central to any process when it comes to getting truth and justice. That remains my party's position.

Mr Gildernew: Thank you for your answer, Minister. Conor Burns claimed that his Government were willing to listen to alternative legacy proposals but said that there needed to be consensus among political parties here. Do you agree that the legacy mechanisms in the Stormont House Agreement represented such a consensus and that the British Government should stop stalling and get on with implementing them?

Mr Givan: It is some years since the proposals in the Stormont House Agreement were made. There is evidence that cases being brought forward continue to lean heavily towards the state. Ninety per cent of all killings that took place in the past were carried out by paramilitary organisations. That is where the focus needs to be. The constant pursuit of state forces has created an imbalance, given that only 10% of the loss of life is attributed to them. I want to see victims get to the truth, but we also need to have confidence that, in doing so, those involved and primarily the paramilitary actors — the terrorists — will tell the truth. There is a long way to travel before a lot of victims will have confidence that the terrorists will ever tell the truth.

Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation

T5. **Mr Newton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in recognising the economic benefits of the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation and the very good work that it was doing before the pandemic, when the First Minister expects the corporation to return to full operations and to make progress on the full economic development and potential of the site. (AQT 1655/17-22)

Mr Givan: I always welcome Members who do not represent the Lagan Valley constituency advocating its economic development. There is no doubt that the Maze/Long Kesh site is uniquely placed in its geographical location and because of its access to main arterial routes. The area needs to be developed; we need to maximise the economic opportunity that the site

represents. The Member has raised that, and I will look at it.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am not particularly interested in the economic development of his constituency but rather in the potential of the Maze/Long Kesh, which goes much wider than that. Does the Minister believe that my constituents who are represented by the Castlereagh East part of Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council would be well represented if the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation had a member of that council as a full member on it?

Mr Givan: The Member is right that Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council falls within the scope of the development opportunity. It is of regional significance and would benefit not only Lisburn but all of Northern Ireland, which will benefit when the Maze site is fully developed. The Member raises an important point about representation on the corporation. A direct representative from that council would add value to the corporation, particularly given that any potential economic benefits may well require support from the council through funding in order to unlock the opportunities.

COVID Vaccination Certificates

T6. **Mr Catney** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, who will know that, last week, the Health Minister confirmed that unvaccinated individuals over the age of 50 are five times more likely to be admitted to hospital with COVID, whether they will, to protect citizens and businesses and to prevent further lockdowns, show leadership by making COVID vaccination certificates mandatory in spaces where social-distancing requirements have been removed. (AQT 1656/17-22)

Mr Givan: Thankfully, the overwhelming majority of those who are 50 and over have received both doses of the vaccine. That has provided them with the kind of protection that was not there in previous waves of the virus. That is why we have not had the same hospitalisation rate as before. When I look at what happened back in January of this year, I see that, at one point, over 800 people with COVID occupied beds in our hospitals. Today, that figure is 314. That is the result of the roll-out of the vaccination programme. We are not seeing the same number of deaths. Every death is more than regrettable, but we are not seeing the same severe health impacts for people aged 50 and over, and that is because of the vaccine programme.

I have asked for the scientific and medical basis for certification. It requires equality impact and human rights considerations to be weighed up. I am sure that the party opposite — the party of civil rights — would want to make sure that, before you introduce such a scheme, which would impinge on people's civil rights, those kinds of assessments are carried out before a decision is taken.

Mr Catney: With rights come responsibility. As I have stated, it is five times more likely that you will be one of the ill ones in hospital if you are unvaccinated and over the age of 50. If the First Minister wants to increase vaccination, why does he not make the decision to mandate passports? Will he confirm whether all his MLAs are double vaccinated? Yes or no? Simple.

Mr Givan: I really regret that demand to ask people whether they have been vaccinated. There are people in our society who have not got the vaccine. I wish that they had got it — I really wish they had — but they have not. It is not the place of Members or other members of society to ask people, "Have you been vaccinated or not?". We do not do that for any other type of illness. Nobody walks up to somebody and says, "Are you on medication because of your depression?", "Are you taking medication because you've got a heart condition?", or "Are you taking your medication because you've got cancer?". There comes a point where we need to respect people's decisions on this. I have received both my vaccinations. The way in which people are trying to coerce others is counterproductive. If you allow people to listen to the medical and scientific advice without these coercive attempts, you will have a better outcome.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: Members, please take your ease as we prepare for the next item of business.

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

Private Members' Business

Arts and the Creative Industries

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly acknowledges the importance of the arts and creative industries sectors, both to life in Northern Ireland and to our local economy; recognises that an estimated 8,000 people are employed within the arts and creative industries sectors, many of whom are self-employed; further recognises the pressure that has been felt by the sectors as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; and calls on the Minister for Communities to work in collaboration with other Executive Ministers to deliver a 10-year strategy for the arts and creative industries, which sets out cross-cutting priorities, develops excellence and delivers long-term allocation of funding. — [Mr Nesbitt.]

Which amendment was:

Insert after "priorities,":

"recognises explicitly the existence of regional inequalities in relation to funding allocations from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and addresses existing regional disparity as an aim in the strategy,". — [Mr Durkan.]

Ms Armstrong: I declare an interest. My niece, Niamh Mageean, is a young artist who is finishing her degree at Ulster University. I also have quite a few singers in my family, some of whom are professionals and others not so much. I join others in wishing Minister Hargey a speedy recovery.

I pay tribute to our arts and creative industries. It is they who provide the inspiration, colour, fun and light in our society. In May, the Minister confirmed:

"The people in these sectors make a substantial contribution to our local economy, quality of life, health and wellbeing, in the shaping of our standing as a place to live, work and visit. They offer the potential to alleviate the isolation and mental health crisis facing us, to help us all interpret and absorb the implications of the pandemic, and to deliver immediate and longer term outcomes for our people, our economy and our future."

Prior to COVID, I was very fortunate to watch 'Shirley Valentine' at the Lyric. I was very fortunate again recently to attend the MAC, on its return, when it was showing 'Distortion', which is a play written by Amanda Verlaque that has been turned into a film for online audiences. I highly recommend that to MLAs as, in parts, the subject matter will be very familiar to all of you. I miss exhibitions and am yet to get back to enjoying viewing displays of work from our talented artists.

We all survived the pandemic lockdown with the TV in our corner keeping us entertained throughout. Amazing artists and our cultural industry have just about survived the pandemic, but some have not. Some have left the industry as the economic turmoil has taken its toll. Earlier, Ms Áine Murphy said that a task force was launched in May 2021 to look at short-term measures to enable recovery. That task force is also to pave the way for a longer term strategy for the arts and creative industries, something that Mr Nesbitt calls for in his motion when it asks for a 10-year strategy.

On behalf of Alliance, I absolutely support the call for a long-term strategy. It is needed to help to set a footing for the way forward for all those who work in the sector, including those who work in film, TV, radio and photography, museums, galleries, libraries, music, performing and visual arts, architecture, the protection and management of heritage, publishing, advertising and marketing, design and designer fashion, crafts, IT software and computer services, and, importantly, those involved in the We Make Events side of the industry, including stage managers, roadies, transport, lighting, sound engineers, exhibition creators and venues, to name a few.

I welcome the motion, and I am very glad that Mr Durkan explained the amendment; I was concerned that it appeared to target the wrong people. We need a much more positive approach to our arts sector. We need the Department for Communities and the Assembly to correct the structural imbalance of arts funding across Northern Ireland and these islands and increase the budget for the arts locally at least in line with Wales, which receives twice as much funding per capita.

In the South, the Government allocated €130 million for the arts in 2021 and consolidated emergency moneys into the arts sector, which is more than five times per capita what the Assembly allocates to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, which is about £10 million per annum. The Welsh Government allocate more than twice as much per capita to the Arts

Council of Wales than we do here. That is a stark issue. The budget for the arts has been consistently cut, year on year. We need to correct that. The Assembly needs to ensure that arts funding here is put on a par with at least Wales. In doing that, surely we could require the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to target those additional resources beyond Belfast.

If you have only £10 million to start with, and you fund an orchestra and a producing theatre — which, by the way, are enjoyed by many across the whole of Northern Ireland, regardless of their location — which take up a third of that budget, the room to invest in and develop others is severely hampered. That needs to be corrected. It is time for rural proofing to be proactively built into the design of all grants and contracts. It is vital that support is provided to all those who issue departmental grants to ensure that everyone in the arts and cultural sector is able to make applications and provide the necessary evidence.

On behalf of Alliance, I confirm, and I believe, that if we moved forward on meeting part 27a of the New Decade, New Approach agreement to introduce the agreed office of identity and cultural expression, our arts and creative industry could promote cultural pluralism —

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

Ms Armstrong: I will indeed.

— and build on Northern Ireland's rich culture.

I thank the proposer for bringing the motion forward. Now that the amendment has been clarified, I confirm that Alliance will be voting for both the motion —

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

Ms Armstrong: — and the amendment.

Ms Ferguson: I welcome the motion that has been brought forward by Mr Nesbitt, and I welcome the opportunity to support it. We are indebted to all of the individuals and organisations across the arts and creative industries sectors; over the past 18 months, those people, despite the stress and uncertainty that they faced about the future, kept spirits high for so many through tough and difficult times.

The arts and creative industries sectors in all of their forms bring people together. They help individuals and communities to connect, develop relationships and create vibrant experiences. They encourage self-expression, improves mental health and well-being, enriches and supports education, builds skills and supports the economy to prosper, which strengthens the position of the North as a must-go destination. As we know, over 1 million people visited the city of Derry in my constituency in 2013 during the City of Culture. Arguably, no sectors were hit harder than the arts and creative industries. The necessary measures in response to COVID-19 meant that our cultural events and venues were the first to close and amongst the last to reopen. Many of those employed in the sector were self-employed, and many also relied on our hospitality sector to ensure income. Many practically lost their income overnight.

When the outbreak of COVID came about in March 2020, our Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, proactively engaged with, listened and responded to the ongoing needs of the arts and creative industries. She values the sectors. She knew immediately to instruct the Arts Council here to ensure that 50% of the £12.9 million in annual core grants given to it by the Department was paid up front to support over 100 key organisations in the sectors.

As interim Minister, Carál was able to secure £29 million of the £33 million of arts and heritage funding that came our way from Britain from the Barnett formula for the arts, culture, language and heritage. That financial support was vital in stabilising organisations, preventing many from closing. For example, of the £5.5 million that was set aside for the creative support fund, £1.5 million went to individuals and small to medium-sized organisations, while £4 million went to musicians, freelancers and arts and culture venues.

In February of this year, under the stability and renewal programme for organisations, a further £10 million of funding was offered to 168 arts and creative organisations to stabilise the sector. That was very much welcomed by the arts and creative sector in the Foyle constituency, by such groups as Greater Shantallow Community Arts, the Derry Theatre Trust, the Walled City Music Trust, the Centre for Contemporary Art, In Your Space Circus Ltd, the North West Carnival Initiative, the North West Cultural Partnership, the Nerve Centre, Void arts centre, the Verbal Arts Centre and the Waterside Theatre Company. I must name them, because it is important to thank them for the critical work that they have been doing in

our city in the most difficult of circumstances. Over the years, those fantastic organisations have done much to nurture and develop talent and inspire others, and they have worked closely within and across neighbourhoods throughout the city to assist in the social, economic and physical renewal of our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Minister Deirdre Hargey was able to visit one of our fantastic creative learning centres — the Nerve Centre — in July of this year. It provides first-class support to our young people, schools and community groups that wish to access learning opportunities and utilise cutting-edge technology that can boost the creative skills, digital literacy and career prospects of our young people. That community learning centre develops skills and development programmes for teachers, youth workers and young people through the use of creative digital technologies.

In May, as other Members have mentioned, the Minister established the culture, arts and heritage recovery task force, the role of which was to consider measures to support reopening and recovery and to pave the way for a long-term strategy for our culture, arts and heritage sector. That task force is crucial to ensuring that our arts and creative industries can survive, thrive and flourish. It is —

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

Ms Ferguson: — important that we work together to secure equality of opportunity.

Finally, it is imperative that we have multi-year funding for the Arts Council, so that organisations are not existing on a year-to-year basis but can engage and sustain strategies —

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

Ms Ferguson: — for future programmes.

Mr Frew: I support the motion, because we value and I value the arts and creative industries. We need to acknowledge their importance and significance, not least because of how they assist in developing a creative mind, inject confidence into people, add to a fulfilled life and enrich all our experiences. They also assist physical and mental health; of that, I have no doubt. The Assembly must therefore recognise how the arts and creative industries assist our people in their way of life and their enrichment.

It is all well and good for me to stand up and say that and for the Assembly to pass a motion, but what does it say about the Assembly and the Executive if we do not even have in place a long-term strategy for the arts and creative industries? I have heard everything that has been said today about funding and the differentials in funding between here and other places close by and, indeed, throughout the British Isles. That should be to our shame.

For any Executive, there will always be a crisis, there will always be pressures, and there will always be something that they can spend their money on rather than what they should spend it on. It is human nature in politics: there will always be a crisis. In this case, it just happens to have been COVID. Of course, I have my arguments for why the arts and creative industries have been let down badly by some of the actions of the Executive and the Health Minister; actions that put those people into that position. Through reflection over many years, we will learn that, in some cases, those people were treated shabbily and unfairly.

3.00 pm

I would like to make a couple of points from a constituency point of view. In recent years, North Antrim lost some of its largest industries. It was at the point of being made redundant that some employees said to themselves that this was their nudge, and they decided to follow their dreams of many years and work hard at photography, artistry or other creative industries. They were following their passion, and it is said that, if you live out your passion in your work, you do not really work a day, but that is not strictly true. Those people had to work really hard to sell, promote and get their wares to market. They had to work unsociable hours. People in the music industry, the arts and so on have to work difficult and antisocial hours. They really have to work hard to sell their wares. It is not just about sitting down and painting or taking photographs all day: they have to sell their wares to make a living. Those people, who had just become self-employed and had no records or bookkeeping from previous years, would have been let down, even with the support packages. That is wrong.

We have a Programme for Government so that, when the Executive hit crisis points or pressure points, it weds everything together. It is the Programme for Government that suggests that Departments and Ministers have to work together. Before we came back to this place, I, along with my colleague Paula Bradley, was part of my party's negotiating team on the

Programme for Government. Others across the way were also involved in those discussions. We knew how important a Programme for Government was in wedding strategies together. The very fact that we are operating in a vacuum without a Programme for Government or a long-term strategy for the arts and creative industries tells me all that I need to know. Do we really value those industries? If we did, we would have a long-term strategy in place, with long-term targets and a suitable funding package to support those people — those with creative minds — who give us so much pride through everything that they do.

Mr Dunne: I also welcome the chance to speak on this important motion. I commend the Member for tabling it.

Our arts and creative industry sectors have, indeed, seen huge growth over the last decade and have undoubtedly put Northern Ireland on the global stage as a place to visit, live and invest in. We have only to think of the success of 'Game of Thrones' and the positive impact that it had and continues to have on Northern Ireland plc.

As my colleague said, this is a valuable sector. That has to come forward at every level. That is shown even by the employment opportunities that such productions have presented to many to get involved in world-renowned TV and film productions. I know some students who have been involved as extras or in acting roles in our various studios over the last one, two or three years, and they have spoken of the incredible experience that it was. That demonstrates the merit of having a vibrant industry. Those industries bring people together across generations and backgrounds, and they have a key role to play in improving physical and mental health.

Locally, over 25,000 people work in the creative industry or creative occupations, which represents just 3.1% of our workforce. Since creative industries rely on individual creativity, skill and talent, they have the potential to create capital and jobs, develop intellectual property and advance the way in which other business sectors innovate and compete. Statistics provided specifically for Northern Ireland show that, in 2016, the music industry alone contributed over £61 million in gross value added (GVA) to our economy and employed over 3,800 people. While music tourism employs just under 1,000 people locally, in the same year, it attracted over 230,000 music tourists to concerts and festivals. We have a thriving music sector, and it is not just about the performers whom we all see on stage; it is

much more than that and comprises everything from musicians to technicians, producers, promoters, venues, retailers and independent record stores. The pandemic certainly brought home the challenges that the sector faced during lockdown.

Northern Ireland is being seen more and more as an ideal location for the arts and creative industries. One example is the music industry, which has been such a driver of economic activity, with headline events such as Ward Park 3 in 2019, which was held in Bangor in my constituency and was headlined by north Down's very own Snow Patrol, with support from local acts. The event attracted 35,000 music fans. Forty-three per cent of ticket sales were from outside Northern Ireland, creating over 60 jobs and generating £3 million in GVA to our economy and huge positive publicity around the world. There were also great figures in respect of day trippers' spend. That, combined with other local events such as the Open House Festival in Bangor, is an example of industries going from strength to strength in recent years.

As was mentioned, the lockdown and the COVID pandemic continue to have an impact on the sector, and some restrictions remain in place that limit the sector's ability to function at full capacity. A recent Arts Council survey of funded individuals showed that 97% of respondents sustained some loss of earnings during lockdown. The average loss of earnings was almost £13,000 per person, which is over £12 million in total. We need to look at how we retain people, develop skills and attract new entrants through apprenticeship programmes and upskilling to ensure that our sector continues to go from strength to strength.

There is also a role for councils to play in supporting investment and encouraging opportunities for the sectors. Just last week, in the Economy Committee, we had a useful briefing from the skills strategy advisory group, and the message was clear on the need for us to have a strategic approach to ensure that we had the right skills in place in our schools, colleges and universities.

Another example is the SPACE performing arts centre in Bangor, which is part of the South Eastern Regional College. It is a £12 million industry standard facility. It is fantastic, and I have been in it a number of times. It is an example of central government investment delivering not only for our young people but for people of all ages, particularly re-emphasising the need for upskilling with the loss of jobs in other sectors.

Work must also continue on addressing our skills deficit and skills imbalances and, ultimately, focus on driving economic growth.

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

Mr Dunne: As my colleague the Chair mentioned, the Ulster Orchestra is another example of a home-grown entity whose performance spreads positivity around the world. It is important that the Minister recognises the value of the sector and delivers for it.

Ms McLaughlin: I support the motion and commend the Member for tabling it. The arts and creative industries sectors create a significant number of jobs and great economic value in Northern Ireland, not to mention the pure joy for folks young and old. They are the lifeblood of a successful economy and thriving communities. Despite that, the sectors are largely neglected.

There was the perverse situation of most if not all of us relying on the arts to provide entertainment and escapism during the lockdowns, yet targeted COVID support for the sector was very much an afterthought and took a regrettably long time to materialise. That was a failure by the Economy Minister and the Communities Minister. Let us face it: COVID pressures, the impact of Brexit and shrinking budgets are a toxic mix that means that the sector is struggling more than ever.

The current model of sporadic and piecemeal funding often produces intolerable working conditions and most certainly stifles creativity. It is well beyond time for a restructuring of the funding model and the introduction of a clear 10-year strategy that nurtures the industry and its workers, enabling it to build on its successes and to create new opportunities for its future development. The restructuring of the funding model must be done by delivering a long-term allocation of funding and by achieving a regional balance.

I know that some Members will accuse me of banging on about regional inequality, but the fact is that arts funding is geared towards Belfast. As my colleague Mark H Durkan said earlier, Derry was the inaugural UK City of Culture, back in 2013. We have never realised a legacy of success from the accolade of being City of Culture. Since 2013, funding has actually drained away from Derry and community and business organisations in the

arts sector. It has been death by a thousand cuts. It is totally unacceptable.

As I have said, I see the outworkings of that in my constituency of Foyle. I have met many constituents who work in the creative industries. They love our city, but feel forced to move to Belfast if they want to stand a chance of gaining a certain level of success in their particular field, as a bare minimum. It is really important to actually be able to earn a living wage that sustains them in their home town. As a city, we are known for our creative talents. We are proud of our exports, but it is bittersweet: we should not have to lose so many people to Belfast and beyond. Nobody should feel pressured to move from their home town.

While I am speaking about Derry, I am absolutely sure that the same message applies to many other areas outside the Belfast bubble. It is imperative that there is a 10-year strategy that includes targets for levelling up. That will have the added bonus of making the arts more accessible to a wider range of audiences, which enriches all communities.

Finally, I particularly welcome that the motion recognises that the creative industries span more than the Department for Communities. In order to develop and implement a recovery plan that actually works, there needs to be cross-departmental planning. Failure to take wide-reaching, collaborative action will put livelihoods at risk. We cannot allow the creative industries to be yet another victim of the Assembly's working in silos. I commend the motion and amendment to the House.

Dr Aiken: I rise to talk specifically about the economic impact of our creative industries, and how they have been a driver not just in providing and improving jobs but in fostering the new and dynamic sectors of society and an opportunity to empower, enthuse and provide that spark of creative genius that has been the ability to channel many talented people into transformational positions. At this stage, I declare an interest as chairperson of the all-party group on science, technology, engineering and mathematics and as advocate for the digital innovation sector in Northern Ireland.

We are all aware of how Northern Ireland has become a centre for the film and screen industry, creating, in a few short years, an entirely new segment of the economy, providing employment for everybody from the part-time extras sporting Viking-length beards — I have never quite managed to do that — to artificial-intelligence researchers building virtual worlds

and entire digital environments that have spin-offs not just in the entertainment fields, but in such areas as medicine, aerospace and civil engineering, among others. The translatability of skills from the creative industries sector is, in many ways, another unique set of skills that allows those in the arts, music and other industries to respond flexibly to the rapidly changing technological scene.

My party's motion calls for the Executive to create a long-term strategy to build on that organic success that, in many ways, has been able to grow and innovate so far, quite frankly, with limited understanding and support from government. Indeed, from talking to many people in the industry, it is clear that trying to get organisations like Invest NI to understand the potential to generate new and sustainable high-value jobs, against what they see as its being wedded to FDI rather than to organic growth, is the frustration of many people. It is pleasing to note, as stated by my party's great North Belfast representative Julie-Anne Corr-Johnston, the recent investment by the Belfast Harbour Commissioners in the North Foreshore Studios. That is a development that we can and should support by helping to equip our further and higher education facilities so that they can upskill and provide the necessary skills for those doing what they do. That means not just those in the arts and creative sector but those who see that as an opportunity for future growth. There is potential for at least an extra 1,000 jobs, and that should be the way ahead and what we are looking to.

3.15 pm

The fact that some of our great success stories seem to have been developed without the hand of government might point to keeping the Executive out of interfering, but, as we have all heard today, the sector has been starved of resources. Reduction in support for the Arts Council over the last few years is a case in point. The arts translate to a richer, more diverse, agile and innovative community.

I would also like to speak about improving the creative opportunities in our education sector — adding art to make STEAM from STEM, so to speak. Music, drama, creative writing, literature and dance are clearly recognised and have value as skills that improve children's brain development and build new skills in creative thinking, the ability to improve concentration and, perhaps more importantly, build self-esteem. As part of our strategy, we have to consider how we can ensure that equal value is given to those areas of education, not instead of but with an increasing emphasis on science,

technology, engineering and maths. I commend the motion to the House.

Ms Bailey: It is great to hear so many speaking in support of the motion and acknowledging the lack of value we have shown the sector. That is exactly what has led to the ongoing disgraceful and stressful situation that the sector continually finds itself in.

I speak as the chair of the all-party group on arts. Everyone is welcome to attend our meetings. The notification for the next one will go out very soon, so I hope to see a lot more new faces there. Thanks to the small number of you who have attended to date.

My first year after leaving school was spent studying drama, and that not only included learning about performing arts but was heavily based on technical skills in those arts, such as stage-setting skills, recording, performing the role of sound technician and everything that goes along with that. My daughter recently graduated from what I still refer to as our art college, but it is, of course, now the Ulster University. She had so little opportunity to find any work or get herself embedded in the sector that she moved elsewhere. On the other hand, my brother has found so much work in some of the new productions here that he struggles to stand still.

Our arts sector has always been on its knees and was on its knees long before COVID. It was not COVID that broke the sector, and it is not COVID that is creating the call for a long-term strategy. I remember the in-year funding cuts being levied upon the sector as far back as 2015, if my memory is correct. At that time, it was great to see the sector come together. It really rallied and had events that filled the Long Gallery to capacity. Yes, I remember your face being there, Mike, as well as a few others. The sector did that to tell us directly about the impact that the cuts were going to have, and I am delighted that, as that played out, the effective campaigning at the time led to the decision on cuts being reversed.

While many good points have been made, I remain pretty alarmed that so many still hold such a narrow definition of what arts are. It is right that we acknowledge the large and established venues, which are very important, but they will have little importance if we do not invest in the very people who will fill them and make them the dynamic centres that they are.

We are all constituency MLAs, so as well as understanding the value of the arts, we have to begin to understand the value and impact of

local events and all the local work that goes on at a real grassroots level, and we have to work hard to try to embed those. It goes beyond a Programme for Government. The arts really do fit so many of those outcomes. Others said that, so I do not want to go over all that again. However, I implore Members to push for a long-term strategy that is a long-term solution to what is a critical problem now.

The arts can really challenge and help us to understand ourselves as a society and as individuals. If we cannot understand where the arts fit with us, as a progressive society or a progressing society, we need to scratch our heads and go into that a wee bit more. The arts provide us with safe places to explore shared cultural spaces and to understand who we are as a people and as individuals, our many identities, our history and our future. They create safe places for all people to explore that at a local level. If we do not understand the value of the arts at a local level, we do not understand their critical nature to working-class people, who are often excluded from larger, more established and more understood arts venues, places and spaces.

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

Ms Bailey: I support the motion. I would like to see the rapid development of an urgently needed strategy whereby we can not just sustain and maintain the sector but allow it to thrive.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Daniel McCrossan. You have up to five minutes to wind on the amendment.

Mr McCrossan: I will go straight to it. I ask Members to bear with me. I might have to be slightly creative as I try to make out my handwriting, which suffered as I tried to keep up with some of the contributions. This is a very important debate. It is important to those in the sector that their voices are being heard in the Chamber today, because, for quite a period, they have been asking for a response from this place that truly reflects the crisis that they have found themselves in, particularly throughout COVID.

Mr Nesbitt opened the debate. As always, he spoke passionately and articulately about the arts. He talked about the type of society that we want to build. He said that it is crucial that the arts be included in the Programme for Government and that any strategy be fully funded and implemented. He also talked about

how the arts improve academic attainment, reduce isolation and improve well-being and the many other benefits that they bring to our lives.

My colleague Mark Durkan also talked about the considerable benefits of the sector. He outlined the considerable concerns that exist in it. He focused strongly and solidly on the need for greater equality. He particularly highlighted the issues facing Derry and Strabane not just during the pandemic but before it. The north-west has largely been left behind. As an MLA in the north-west, I have heard that time and time again. The focus needs to be on areas not just within but beyond the 30-mile radius of Belfast in order to truly capture the creativity of the entirety of this place.

Áine Murphy talked about the importance of the arts sector. She said that it is an integral part of our society in the North of Ireland. COVID has hit that sector hardest. She was right to point out that it was the first to close and the last to open, and that, as a result, many people in our society have struggled badly.

Paula Bradley largely agreed. She talked about the disproportionate impact on the sector, particularly throughout COVID. She talked about the need for a targeted and evidence-based approach to address the inequalities. She said that, given the huge amount of talent that exists, we could lead from the front. With a proper, fully funded strategy, we certainly could do that.

Kellie Armstrong also spoke very passionately about the arts — the whole House is on the one page today, which is a record in itself — and about the greater need for support. She said that she supports the amendment and the motion.

I welcome Ciara Ferguson to the Assembly. I have not had the opportunity to do so publicly. You are very welcome, and congratulations on your appointment. Ciara talked about the many benefits of the arts and culture sector and how it has been hit harder than any other sector. She repeated what her colleague Áine Murphy said about it being the first to close and the last to open.

My colleague Sinead McLaughlin talked about the sector being the lifeblood of a successful economy and of thriving communities, and I agree with that. We can see, day in and day out, the importance of the sector.

I am tight for time; I have one and a half minutes left to get through this. Largely, most Members in the House are on the same page

today, and that is a very positive note to strike. I hope that a strategy will be brought forward. Imagine what this place could do and what the creative arts and culture sector could do if it was properly funded and if a strategy was in place. Look at what we have achieved. Mr Dunne talked about 'Game of Thrones'; I am a huge fan and I have watched it three times. It really shows the huge amount of talent that exists here and what this place can offer.

With proper investment going forward, the arts can only benefit each and every one of us. It enriches our lives and improves our health and well-being. It creates a glimmer of hope and light in darkness. We have been through dark times, and we have seen how people got creative on social media throughout the pandemic and kept us all glued to their many talents. They also engaged with people who found themselves in very isolated situations.

The beautiful thing about this sector is that it does not discriminate; it is open to everybody. No matter your age or background, there is an opportunity for you. There are many Members in the House who can be very creative, and I am sure that, in the future, there may be opportunities for them as well.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Mike Nesbitt to conclude and wind up the debate on the motion. The Member has up to 10 minutes.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank every Member who contributed to the debate; it is much appreciated. Many years ago, on my first visit to what was then the Arts Council headquarters at MacNeice House on the Malone Road, I was struck by the fireplace in the reception area. There was one of those big charity cheques which made clear that, for every pound that we invested in the arts and creative industries in Northern Ireland, we got a return of £7 or £8, I think it was. That was the multiplier effect in economic terms.

At the event that Clare Bailey mentioned, which took place a few years ago in the Long Gallery when we brought up art organisations and artists, one of the contributions that really struck me was from Bill Wolsey, who I think employs more people in hospitality than any other organisation in Northern Ireland. He was passionate in informing us that having the performing arts in his bars, restaurants and hotels was absolutely critical to his business and to making his venues attractive. It was not just about the drink and the food; the arts and the performing arts were absolutely vital. Yet compare what we do with neighbours with similar remits: Wales and the Republic of

Ireland. We currently contribute £5.31 per head, while Wales contributes £10.03 and the Republic of Ireland contributes £12.79. I am sensing agreement in the Chamber that that is something of a false economy.

The debate has focused on four broad areas. There have been equality issues, and I thank Paula Bradley for mentioning the socio-economic to add to the geographic that is in the SDLP amendment, which my party will support. Secondly, there is the need for long-term funding and strategy. Again, Paula Bradley, Paul Frew, Steve Aiken and Sinead McLaughlin all mentioned that. Then there are the economic benefits — again, something that was stressed by Sinead McLaughlin, who also talked about the "pure joy". That is the final area — the personal benefits. I was very struck by what Mr Frew said about people following their dreams after the shock of the major industrial closures in his constituency.

Mr Durkan gave us a stark illustration of the geographic disparity in funding — £22 million for Belfast and £3 million for Derry/Londonderry. On the face of it, that is a very stark illustration of the fact that there is disparity and a need to level up regional funding. He also talked about organisations that were deemed too big to fail. We have to think about a balance here because, as in sport, we need elite performers as well as mass participation events.

That is why we need a long-term, 10-year strategy that finds the right balance, or certainly a much better balance than we have at present.

3.30 pm

Mr Durkan also referenced the binge watching of TV series that has been going on during the pandemic. He did not tell us what he has been watching, but Áine Murphy did. She mentioned 'The Fall', but she could also have mentioned 'Line of Duty'. In mentioning such series, we might acknowledge how our finest actors, such as Jamie Dornan, Adrian Dunbar, Liam Neeson and Jimmy Whatshisname, are global ambassadors. Stephen Dunne referenced 'Game of Thrones'. We could add tourism to the list of sectors that benefit from investment in the arts.

Many Members were keen to point out that, although the pandemic has been a tough time, the Minister, Deirdre Hargey, has done what she can to try to mitigate the damage done. Both Áine Murphy and Ciara Ferguson stressed the fact that one of Minister Hargey's first

actions was to insist that 50% of the £12.9 million available to the arts be paid out up front. Áine Murphy did a good job of rehearsing all the actions that her Sinn Féin colleague Minister Hargey has taken over the past couple of years. Ciara Ferguson went as far as to acknowledge that the Barnett formula helped keep organisational doors open during the pandemic. She went on to namecheck a number of those organisations in her constituency, as did Stephen Dunne, who went so far as to claim ownership of Snow Patrol for North Down.

Neither of our Sinn Féin contributors went quite so far as to admit that the £22 million coming out of Her Majesty's Treasury for COVID mitigations in the arts proves the point that it has never been more important for Northern Ireland to be part of the United Kingdom. That having been said, I would not expect them to do that. I can do it myself.

We need a long-term strategy for what the arts can do. I was struck by my colleague Steve Aiken's talking not just about a long-term strategy but about the difficulty in impressing on organisations such as Invest Northern Ireland that it is not all about foreign direct investment and that organic growth is equally important to our future. We need to turn STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — into "STEAM" by adding reference to the arts.

Can we use art and the creative industries to help people live more fulfilled and enriched lives? I believe that we can. Many Members, including Paul Frew and Sinead McLaughlin, made that point during their contribution. I am struck by the fact that Mr Durkan made reference to the fact that the UK Government at one point talked about how Fatima should give up a career in the arts to rethink and retrain. That is simply not the way in which we want to go.

I will close with a reference to remarks made by Clare Bailey, who said that the arts can help us explore who we are. I could not agree more. I welcome the fact that, in her letter, Minister Hargey, who apologises for not being here through illness — I again wish her a full and speedy recovery — has made it clear that she has absolutely no difficulty with our call for her to work with Executive colleagues to bring forward that 10-year strategy. Back in 2016, we called for an interdepartmental approach to this, involving not just the Department for Communities but the Department of Education, the Department for the Economy, the Department of Health and the Department of Justice. All have roles to play in bringing

forward a coherent and inclusive 10-year strategy.

Kellie Armstrong talked about watching 'Shirley Valentine' just before COVID hit. I close with a quotation from Shirley Valentine, who said:

"I have allowed myself to lead this little life, when inside me there was so much more."

Our children go to school, and we put a great emphasis on their achieving academically. We give them a target of five A* to C grades at GCSE level. That is fine, particularly if they are academic, but they may not be academic.

The spark of ability and creativity inside them may not lie in a classroom. They may find it on the sports field, on the stage or by playing a musical instrument. It is our duty to help those young people to find that spark wherever it originates and to turn it into a great forest fire of passion for learning and life. That is where the arts and the creative industries have a role to play.

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 acknowledges the importance of the arts and creative industries sectors, both to life in Northern Ireland and to our local economy; recognises that an estimated 8,000 people are employed within the arts and creative industries sectors, many of whom are self-employed; further recognises the pressure that has been felt by the sectors as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; and calls on the Minister for Communities to work in collaboration with other Executive Ministers to deliver a 10-year strategy for the arts and creative industries, which sets out cross-cutting priorities, recognises explicitly the existence of regional inequalities in relation to funding allocations from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and addresses existing regional disparity as an aim in the strategy, develops excellence and delivers long-term allocation of funding.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease before the next item of business.

Labour Shortages

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before we begin, I advise Members that the Minister for the Economy has given notice that he is not available to respond to the debate. However, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has agreed to respond to the debate on behalf of the Executive.

Dr Archibald: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the impact that labour shortages are having in the agri-food and haulage sectors locally and in Britain; acknowledges that these sectors relied on EU labour; recognises that these labour shortages are a direct consequence of Brexit and the end to freedom of movement for EU workers; believes that the British Government need to act urgently to address labour shortages and enable EU citizens to come here to work and live; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to make clear to the British Government the significant impact labour shortages are having on the local economy and the need to rectify the situation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): 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 a further 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Dr Archibald: The motion notes with concern the impact that labour shortages are having, particularly on our agri-food sector, which relied greatly on workers from across the EU. The ending of freedom of movement, the outworking of Brexit and the British Government's post-Brexit immigration policies have created this situation. There is a need for the British Government to act urgently to address labour shortages and enable EU citizens to come here to work and live, and the motion calls for that and for the Economy Minister to make clear to the British Government the significant impact that labour shortages are having on our local economy and the need to rectify that situation.

Over 200,000 EU nationals left Britain in the past couple of years, so anyone who asserts that labour shortages are nothing to do with Brexit is like a child with their fingers in their ears and their eyes squeezed shut. They do not want to know. The anti-migrant, xenophobic, English nationalist motivation driving the post-referendum Brexit campaign resulted in EU nationals — people who had made their homes

in Britain and locally and who were valued members of our communities — reporting an increase in hostility and racist incidents. It is also a matter of fact that the value of sterling plummeted after the referendum, so wages were worth relatively less in euros than before Brexit. Of course, this year, freedom of movement has ended, so those who wanted to remain in Britain or the North had to go through the bureaucracy of applying for settled status. It is blinkered, head-in-the-sand nonsense to assert that labour shortages are not because of Brexit but simply policy after Brexit, as the Agriculture Minister has done.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: No, I will not. I need to make some progress.

It is no surprise that the Minister would do so, being a champion and a cheerleader for the type of Brexit that has resulted in empty shelves and, in his own words, could see us in the bizarre situation of having food shortages in our shops and healthy animals in our own country being slaughtered on farms and not used for food production. That would be a ridiculous situation where we would try to import from other parts of the world at a higher cost because we have a labour shortage issue here. Nobody would want to take ownership of that, but it is ownership that he and his DUP colleagues, who aligned themselves with the most right-wing elements of the Tory Party to deliver a hard Brexit, must take. While the protocol mitigates some of the impacts of Brexit, one of those that it does not provide for is the loss of freedom of movement and, for us, the loss of the ability to have workers from across the EU come here to work, make their homes and add to the vibrancy of our communities. I, for one, find that sad.

If it were not incredulous enough that some would try to paint the labour shortages as nothing to do with Brexit, what is worse are those who suggest that there was a grand design to push up wages. Let us be very clear: if wages have increased in Britain, it is due to the simple economics of supply and demand. Shortages of workers have created a situation where employers are being forced to offer better pay, and, while that may represent a better outcome for workers in the short term, it does not fix the problem and is simply a short-term fix if it is not accompanied by protections for those workers' terms and conditions. It is a demonstrable fallacy that the Tories, or the DUP, for that matter, suddenly care about

workers' rights. That is the most implausible of all the aspects of this sorry tale. We are talking about a party that has rolled back on trade union rights, limited strike action and saw Brexit as an opportunity to dismantle workers' protections. Nothing will convince me that any increase in wages, even if it is statistically the case that wages have increased, is anything other than consequential.

The British Government also have no intention of doing anything to solve the problems that they have created. The temporary visas for HGV drivers fall far short of the number and nature of interventions required. In a recent response to the Chair of the AERA Committee on the responses of various British Ministers to request actions to alleviate the labour shortages faced here, Minister Poots — I appreciate his being here to respond to the debate — outlined a shocking disregard. I use the word "shocking" somewhat advisedly because nothing really shocks us when it comes to Tory politicians' disregard for the North. The responses showed shocking disregard of the impact of the British Government's post-Brexit immigration policy on our economy. There was no flexibility in the seasonal agricultural workers pilot; there was no flexibility in the shortage occupations list; and there was no action at all to address the issues. Our economy and our very successful agri-food sector in particular are simply collateral damage in the delivery of a right-wing hard Brexit driven by jingoistic sentiments.

The DUP, and others, are responsible for delivering that Brexit and seem to be in denial about what is needed. We need to be honest about the cause of the problems we now face and that, in itself, delivers a solution: allowing EU citizens to come and work here again to help create a more successful and welcoming economy. We also need to focus on developing the skills to meet the needs of all sectors of our economy, including those that now have shortages. However, some of those are not short-term fixes. We need to do both, and one, of course, supports the other.

3.45 pm

We also have the opportunity to take advantage of our trading arrangements under the protocol to bring investment and create jobs. Therefore, instead of focusing on ideology, all parties should work to deliver for citizens by creating a stronger economy.

Mr K Buchanan: The Democratic Unionist Party understands the seriousness of the current labour shortages that are affecting the

local agri-food and haulage sectors. I represent a rural constituency and have worked in that sector for over 20 years, so I fully recognise the importance of the sector to the Northern Ireland economy. It is valued at £5 billion and employs around 113,000 people.

The Irish Farmers' Association (IFA) recently highlighted a similar labour crisis in the Irish Republic's pig sector. I am not aware that the Republic of Ireland has left the European Union. They are, obviously, experiencing some of the issues that we have here. That demonstrates that EEA free movement is not the answer that some in the House claim that it is. The Irish Farmers' Association, in the Irish Republic, has also expressed concern about the lack of suitable labour available for processing and on pig farms, and that is despite its continued membership of the EU and access to free movement.

Ironically, the same parties that are calling on those of us who oppose the protocol to focus on practical solutions would rather grandstand on that issue than get behind the clear and tangible asks that the Agriculture Minister has made to DEFRA and the Home Office. Those asks include relaxing the English language requirements of the points-based system for agri-food workers, speeding up processing times for agri-food visas, placing the butchery profession on the shortage occupation list, extra routes for temporary non-seasonal workers and expanding the sectors covered by the seasonal worker scheme.

The reality is that Brexit did not cause the current crisis; the new UK domestic immigration policy is the main catalyst. There is scope for change, and we will be making that case strongly. The DUP opposes key recommendations outlined in the report, which include the end of all specific work migration routes for low-skilled workers except seasonal and agricultural, rejecting a regional salary threshold and a shortage occupation list for Northern Ireland that is better suited to the needs of local sectors.

There have been sensational reports of over one million EEA workers leaving the UK. Those reports have, largely, been discredited. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) statistics indicate that 200,000 is a more accurate figure. In truth, by the end of May 2021, there had been 5-6 million applications for settled status. If they wish, those workers can return to the UK when sectors lack the relevant skills or the terms and conditions do not incentivise those who qualify to come forward. Our immigration

rules must be adaptable to ease the pressures that can build.

The coronavirus pandemic has not been mentioned — some people may have missed that — and, along with changes to the UK's immigration policy, that has impacted almost all parts of our economy and has manifested itself in various forms, including the shortage of HGV drivers. There have been recent claims that as many as 600,000 people in the UK currently have the necessary licences but are not active in that profession. Although the granting of emergency visas for 5,000 HGV drivers is welcome, it represents nothing more than a sticking plaster.

Members will be aware that the responsibility for testing HGV drivers falls to the Minister for Infrastructure, and she will have to look at what her Department can do to ease those problems. It is clear that those issues are not unique to Northern Ireland, with HGV driver shortages also being reported across Europe, including the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, the shortage is not a Brexit issue. Engagement on the terms and conditions for staff in the haulage industry will also be important.

The Ulster University Economic Policy Centre's (UUEPC) report, 'Northern Ireland Skills Barometer' anticipates that an estimated 800 new road transport drivers, including HGV drivers, will be needed every year in Northern Ireland up to 2028.

The Department for the Economy's Apprenticeships NI programme offers funded training to those aged between 16 and 24, who are interested in driving goods vehicles at levels 2 and 3. Work is currently under way to amend the age eligibility criteria for Apprenticeships NI frameworks, which will make them available to older apprentices. Both apprenticeship frameworks include knowledge-based and competence-based qualifications in driving a range of goods vehicles, including articulated vehicles.

There has been increased demand for workers in the hospitality sector across Northern Ireland, with a high level of vacancies in a number of occupations. Those workers include chefs, catering assistants, bartenders and waiting staff. Representatives of the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association have said that the current disruption is down to a number of factors, including access to labour, COVID restrictions, and logistics and supply chains, which have been disrupted globally.

The Minister for the Economy is taking a number of measures to address shortages in the hospitality and tourism sector. It is important that the Department continues to support further education colleges and the skills focus programme, which offer bespoke training aimed at hospitality and tourism managers. Programmes such as the skills intervention programme and SKILL UP are also important to deliver a wide range —

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

Mr K Buchanan: — of qualifications. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr O'Toole: I support the motion from Sinn Féin. It would have been something of a surprise to Members had I not said that.

I am sometimes intrigued by the logic at work when people say that a labour shortage, particularly a shortage of workers from the EU 26, because, of course, the South of Ireland — the Republic — is not subject to the same restrictions on immigration as the rest of the EU, has nothing to do with Brexit. They also say that it is purely a policy choice by the UK Government and Ministers here, including the Minister — I welcome him to his place — who might say that that policy choice is not one they agree with.

How could they make that policy choice, and why have they made it? They made the choice to restrict — in fact, to end — freedom of movement from the EU because that was core to and inherent in the project of Brexit. That is undeniable. Let us stop that pretence. The reason we cannot bring EU workers to particular sectors to work here is because the UK left the European Union. It did not just leave the European Union but did so in a way that demanded from its perspective that it leave the single market and would no longer have freedom of movement. Let us just kill that silly argument.

It is true, as some have said, that there are broader, more global factors at work in terms of international labour crises. EU countries are also having issues with labour shortages and there are supply chain crises, but the truth is that it is worse in Britain, and I say Britain meaning Great Britain, because it has not only restricted its ability to bring in people from the EU to work but left the single market for goods, which, thankfully, we have not because we have some protections under the protocol.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I will, briefly.

Mr Allister: What does the Member say to the fact, which sometimes has a habit of getting in the way of the political line the Member wants to pursue, that the number of haulage drivers that Poland is short of is twice the figure of the EU? Poland is still in the EU, at least for now.

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

Mr O'Toole: Thank you very much. That does not really disprove the point that a lack of access to EU workers is still a problem for the UK economy. I acknowledge that there are labour issues in other countries, but they are more acute in Britain because Britain does not have access to a labour market of half a billion people. That is self-evident, and it has been said by many economists. I am happy to take the Member's point, but I do not quite understand what it is and I do not think it disproves anything that I have said.

It is clear that the labour crisis is causing real problems for particular sectors that are highly important to the Northern Ireland economy, most obviously the agri-food sector, as has been acknowledged by the Agriculture Minister himself. I welcome the fact that repeated letters have been sent not just by the Agriculture Minister but by his colleague the Economy Minister over some years now to try to convince the UK Government to adjust their policy on visas and access to labour from around the world and the EU. It is revealing, is it not, that they have not budged an inch? They have not moved at all despite the repeated requests of Ministers, particular Ministers from the DUP, to ease the rules. I wonder if those DUP Ministers might pause just for a second to reflect on whether the Brexit that they championed in the first place helped to create the consequences that they are now trying to undo and ameliorate.

I hear loud sighs from across the Chamber. I am sure that we will hear an insight from the Minister as to how he will tackle the labour crises.

It is important to say that, from my perspective, it is not simply about the economic impact of the loss of EU labour. That is critical for particular sectors, especially our agri-food sector, but it is critical for other sectors too. Yesterday, there were reports of the impending crisis — indeed, the current crisis — facing the health and social care sector in England

because of the cuts in their access to healthcare workers from the continent. Proportionately, that is not as big a problem for Northern Ireland, because a smaller proportion of our NHS workforce comes from the continent, but it gives an insight into the extraordinary problems created by the UK's decision to end freedom of movement.

For me, the end of freedom of movement is not simply an economic problem; it is a societal tragedy. The ability to live and work across the European Union was an enormous benefit to not just workers in the economy but all of us: citizens, young people and the people whom we represent. It saddens me that, for young people from this society who, for whatever reason, are not able or do not want to avail themselves of EU citizenship via an Irish passport — there will be some who choose not to, because we are a plural society — those options are closed off now. They are closed off by decisions made by the British Government and supported by parties in the Chamber. That is a great tragedy for young British citizens and British passport holders from Northern Ireland, and I wish that they had not been left with that restriction on their rights.

I agree with the motion, but it is incumbent on me to say that I hold out little hope that the UK Government will do anything on the basis of requests and motions from the Chamber. They have shown that they care little about what is good for the Northern Ireland economy or what people in this Assembly or society say.

Mr Nesbitt: The Ulster Unionist Party will not support the motion, not because we are blind to the fact that there is an issue but because we believe that the motion is too narrow and is, frankly, founded in ideological opportunism. I ask Members to remind themselves that that comes from a man who was totally against Brexit, who was leader of the Ulster Unionist Party in 2016, who campaigned to remain and who warned of the negative consequences of leaving.

The fact is that our economy faces massive challenges and not just in skills and labour shortages. Last Friday, the Economy Committee had an urgent virtual briefing from the Utility Regulator on energy prices. It was frightening — frightening — particularly in the context of the loss of the £20 uplift in universal credit. How many of our fellow citizens are about to be plunged into poverty and be unable to afford their energy? We were told that one gas provider that has already had a massive hike in prices is about to ask for another rise before Christmas of 40%: four zero per cent. It

is anticipated that Power NI will ask for something in the region of 15% to be put on electricity bills in the new year. That is not about labour shortages. It is about other factors: the pandemic; the production of raw materials, which is failing globally; a 250% increase in the cost of wholesale gas; and inflation.

Yes, we have labour shortages, but they are not all linked to the problems of Brexit, because there are skill shortages in continental Europe. Mr Allister has just made the point about haulage drivers in Poland. The leader of my party, Doug Beattie, and I recently travelled to meet some leading business people from the Republic of Ireland. They have skill shortages as well. Of course, they remain in the European Union with access to the EU 26 on the continent and free access around Britain and Ireland, yet they have shortages, and they look to us, our universities and our young people for the answers.

4.00 pm

The motion calls on the Minister for the Economy to:

"make clear to the British Government the significant impact labour shortages are having on the local economy".

I really do not think that the UK Government are unaware of the issues that we face. What the Ulster Unionist Party calls for is for the Economy Minister to engage with the migration advisory committee (MAC) about the need for the MAC urgently to broaden the categories of shortage occupation lists so that we can accommodate more workers, particularly in agri-food and haulage. I say to Mr O'Toole, who mentioned the social care sector, that the migration advisory committee is looking at the social care sector and at how it can fill the gaps and labour shortages there.

Mr Dickson: I thank Mr Nesbitt for giving way. The motion calls on the Economy Minister to reaffirm the issue of labour shortages with the United Kingdom Government. While we all appreciate that they must know about them, because they see the effect day and daily on the rest of the United Kingdom, the main thrust of the motion is surely to emphasise that point and encourage them to do something about it.

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

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention. The final part of the motion

certainly calls on the Government to rectify the situation. What I am saying is that I am giving you how it can be rectified, not just calling for it to be rectified: get the MAC to look at the issue.

Dr Archibald: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: I give way to the Chair of the Economy Committee.

Dr Archibald: The British Government have already ignored the MAC's recommendations on the North.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for her point. Just because you do not succeed once does not mean that you should not try a second time.

We face a broader, deeper global problem. Recently, I listened to Miguel Patricio, the boss of Kraft Heinz — one of the biggest agri-food businesses in the United States — saying on the BBC that inflation is the problem across the board. The cost of ingredients such as cereals and oils has pushed global food prices to a 10-year high, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. That is a problem that we need to be focused on: the fact that the production costs of raw materials, ranging from crops to vegetable oils, are rising. Measures to control the pandemic, as well as illness, have limited output and delivery. That is a problem that we want to deal with. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development says that prices in the G20 group of major economies will grow faster than pre-pandemic for at least two more years. That is an issue that we should deal with.

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

Mr Nesbitt: I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was not watching the clock. Sadly, we will not support the motion, because it is too narrow.

Mr Dickson: I support the motion. Again it seems to me that we are picking up the pieces of Brexit and the harm that it is doing to our economy. We hear increasingly about shortages of people, particularly in logistics and hospitality. We also face major shortages of healthcare staff and have been doing so for a number of years. There are those who say that the labour shortages that are affecting us affect the entire world. Global supply chains have been disrupted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; there is no doubt about that. However, it appears that that has been compounded by the problems of Brexit in the

United Kingdom to create an even more serious situation.

Many EU workers left the United Kingdom during the pandemic to go home. They also left because of a fall in demand for labour in many sectors. However, following the UK's departure from the EU at the start of this year and the end of freedom of movement, overnight a major source of workers for the United Kingdom has been cut off. While the pandemic has had its impact, Brexit has made it worse. I cannot help but note that petrol pumps are not running dry in France, Germany or many other parts of Europe. Luckily, in Northern Ireland, we have not seen those fuel shortages or, indeed, empty supermarket shelves to any great extent.

I believe that there is a general feeling across the Assembly that we should do something to tackle labour shortages.

Hospitality has been heavily impacted on, with reduced hours and the closure of restaurants, and, just as it is about to recover from the extreme challenges of COVID, we restrict the number of people who are available to work in the sector.

I am delighted that the Agriculture Minister is here. I recognise the support that he has given to that industry and how he has spoken about it. It is a major industry for us in Northern Ireland, and, without workers to pick and process crops, for example, we cannot continue to expand our successful agri-food business. Do not for one moment think that those are low-skilled, low-paid jobs: they are not. In many cases, they are highly skilled jobs. You only had to watch 'Countryfile' on TV last night to see that very point being made about the skills of seasonal workers coming into the United Kingdom. There was a little competition between a robot and human beings, and the human beings won hands down when it came to their ability to do the job.

Unfortunately, the United Kingdom Government response has been haphazard, saying that we need to create a high-skill, high-wage economy. That certainly does not happen overnight, and it certainly does not happen without investment in skills and training. How will it be delivered? Unfortunately, the Economy Minister is not here to answer such questions, but perhaps he has briefed the Agriculture Minister to deal with those points.

We also need to challenge the narrative that the workers from many EU countries who used to come to the United Kingdom were essentially low-skilled workers and cheap labour. For many

years, people who came from EU countries to Northern Ireland made an invaluable contribution through an array of in-demand skills, across society and the economy, from working in the health service to working in the tech sector to making sure that we could get the goods in our shops that we required.

Economic isolation will not automatically deliver the high-skill, high-wage economy; in fact, there is a worrying indication that this winter may be the most financially stretching in decades for many families. Shortages of goods may only get worse, owing to shortages of workers in food processing and logistics, and that situation is now heightened by fuel costs. We are outside the club, so we cannot benefit from being in the club. We should remember that Germany, for example, is a highly productive economy with high wages, as are the Scandinavian countries, yet they have not isolated themselves in order to achieve that; rather, they have joined others to achieve it, delivering investment in skills and infrastructure.

The United Kingdom Government have made minor concessions on short visas for European workers, but it is not enough. In the context of shortages of workers elsewhere, why would EU workers leave their home country to come to the UK, where they will be given only a few short months before they are told to leave, when they have the potential to go to 26 other countries and enjoy greater rights and the ability to settle there permanently? We have major work to do to repair our international reputation as a welcoming place for workers. Of course we want a high-wage and high-skill economy that is productive, but, in order to achieve and deliver that, we have to invest in people and provide a proper social security net.

We also need to realise that, as we move from a fossil fuel-dependent economy to a clean, zero-carbon future, no one must be left behind. That is why the Alliance Party has produced its green new deal proposals to ensure training and support for everyone [*Inaudible.*]

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

Mr Dickson: Much of that task falls to the UK Government. The House's task today is to encourage our Economy and Agriculture Ministers to speak up for Northern Ireland. That is what the motion calls on us to do —

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

Mr Dickson: — and that is why I express my disappointment that it —

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

Mr Dickson: — will not find that support around the House.

Mr Delargy: I share the surprise of my colleague Caoimhe Archibald that Edwin Poots and the DUP have had a road to Damascus moment and suddenly become champions of workers' rights. I welcome that seismic shift in DUP thinking, and I hope that they, finally, have seen the light. I hope that the DUP can follow up on its new-found socialist credentials by supporting Sinn Féin's continued calls for a living wage for all our workers: the hauliers, the carers, the supermarket workers and all the other professionals who have sustained us throughout the pandemic.

For me, the DUP position just does not add up. The legacy of 10 years of DUP Economy Ministers is one of misery. Wages in the North are the lowest across these islands, with over a quarter of our workers earning just £8.21 an hour.

In Britain, shortages of CO2 and haulage drivers have caused havoc with our food supplies and resulted in empty shelves in the supermarkets there. Our place in the single market has insulated us from some of those shortages but not all of them.

Let us not forget the root cause of the entire debacle: Brexit. It is the hard Brexit, championed by the DUP and the Tories, that has completely upended the flows of labour. We are totally cut off from a labour market of over 200 million because of Brexit. Brexit means that we no longer have access to vital EU funding, such as £50 million from the European Social Fund, which played a central role in training people up for the workforce.

I will give three examples that, to me, validate my apprehension about believing the new DUP position. First, when I recently challenged the Economy Minister on his failure to include 16- and 17-year-olds in the voucher scheme, his reply painted a very different picture from today's DUP position. He said that the voucher was not about the public but about businesses. Secondly, if the DUP is concerned about wages, why is Edwin Poots trying to abolish the Agricultural Wages Board, an action that will cut the wage guarantee that keeps agricultural minimum pay rates above standard minimum

wage rates? Thirdly, not only did the DUP campaign for Brexit but former Economy Minister Diane Dodds called for the salary threshold for EU workers who arrived in the North through the EU Settlement Scheme to be reduced. Actions speak louder than words.

Mr Dunne: There is no doubt that the pandemic continues to cause many challenges in many sectors across the globe. In Northern Ireland, we face many challenges, including in our agri-food and haulage sectors, the two sectors that are specifically mentioned in the motion. Those two vital sectors have been an integral part of our economy for many years. Recently, people who were at the Balmoral show got a sample of our agri-food sector, saw the quality on show from producers and farmers and heard from those who sell their products here about what a great place this is to do business.

The issues in the haulage sector are not unique to Northern Ireland. HGV driver shortages are being reported across Europe, including in the Republic of Ireland. According to data collected by Transport Intelligence, Poland, which was mentioned earlier, was short of more than 120,000 drivers last year, and between 45,000 and 60,000 drivers were needed in Germany. As travel became increasingly restricted last year and large parts of the economy across the globe shut down, many drivers went home. Even today, haulage companies say that very few of those drivers have returned. Indeed, just 10 days ago, 'The Washington Post' reported the severe problems that the USA faces in its supply chain and the haulage challenges that it has through not having enough lorry drivers or warehouse workers, all of which are creating huge logistical challenges for the industry. Ultimately, those challenges are passed on to consumers.

There is also the issue of the haulage sector being seen as an ageing occupation and not attractive to young people. Haulage companies say that the average age of HGV drivers in the UK is 55. The companies want more to be done to attract younger workers, including an improvement in terms and conditions, better facilities for drivers and recognition that they are an integral part of the economy.

The pandemic also created a large backlog in HGV driver tests. It has been impossible to get enough drivers up and running. Indeed, the industry warned the Prime Minister in June that 25,000 fewer candidates passed their test in 2020 than in 2019. One practical solution to help to address the backlog in the number of local HGV driver tests was swiftly dismissed last week by our Infrastructure Minister. She

was asked whether she would amend the trailer test requirements and bring them in line with those in GB, which would have helped to free up more examiners so that they could carry out HGV tests rather than small trailer tests. By amending the trailer test criteria in Great Britain, an additional 50,000 HGV lorry tests will be made available each year to support the industry and wider society.

There are also challenges from labour shortages in our agri-food sector, with shortages on farms and in meat processing plants. Many workers from the EU and the rest of the world returned home during the pandemic and did not return.

As was mentioned by my colleague — it is such an important point that it is worth repeating — just over two weeks ago, the Irish Farmers' Association in the Irish Republic expressed concern regarding the lack of suitable labour available at processing level and on pig farms. There is a backlog of animals on farms because processors do not have the workforce required to maintain the essential level of slaughter. There are also gaps in skilled butchery. Work has been undertaken by our AERA and Economy Ministers to address those issues. They are not interested in words; they are interested in action. They are taking real steps with the UK Government to look at things such as the immigration policy to ensure that Northern Ireland's economy does not suffer.

4.15 pm

Work has also been undertaken to prioritise the speed of processing time for agri-food visas under tier 2 and to consider additional routes for temporary non-seasonal agricultural workers. It was clear from listening to the food processing industry just today that it has innovative options in terms of the English language requirement. That work needs to continue so that those workers can be trained up on the language during their time of employment. That could address the backlog. A considerable amount of work has also been done in our Economy Department. Its 10X Economy skills strategy will help to ensure that our citizens and the business community have access to the modern and relevant skills that we all need. Representatives of the Food and Drink Association have said that the current disruption is down to a number of factors, including labour access, COVID restrictions, and logistics and supply chains —

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

Mr Dunne: — being disrupted.

Ms McLaughlin: I support the motion. I am sure that the Minister for the Economy and the Agriculture Minister will argue that the labour and skills shortages that we are suffering today are not simply the result of the Brexit that they and their party so strongly argued for and voted into place. If the Minister says that skills shortages already existed prior to Brexit, he will certainly have a point. Fourteen years of DUP leadership in the Department with responsibility for the economy has failed to provide the full range of skills that our labour market needs. Far too many of our highly skilled workers and many of our best-qualified students leave the North and never return. It must be stressed that that is made much worse by the dysfunctionality of the Government whom we have here. The failure of the two largest parties to move on from the past, and the lack of real leadership by those two parties over the past 14 years, has led in a significant way to the skills shortage.

Mr K Buchanan: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: Sorry, I have a lot to get through, Keith.

We need a more positive and progressive Government to persuade more of our young people to stay here, to commit to their futures here, to rebuild our society here and to provide us with the skills that we need to expand our economy and increase the wages of all our people. Over the years, the Economy Committee has received a raft of reports outlining the skills shortages in our economy. They consistently point to skills deficiencies in key vocational areas. Just last week, the Economy Committee was briefed by the skills strategy advisory group. We were told that, over the past decade, investment in education and skills has fallen significantly. A recent assessment of Northern Ireland's competitiveness by Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre shows how that has affected our competitive performance, with several smaller advanced economies now outperforming us, such as Finland, Norway, Estonia, Ireland, Iceland, Slovenia, Lithuania, Latvia, Cyprus and Luxembourg. The list goes on.

Why, after 14 years of DUP leadership of the economy Department, are we continuing to suffer serious skills shortages? Why have they got worse following Brexit? Is it possible that the DUP did not really understand or anticipate the full impact of its own Brexit? We now have a shortage of over 4,000 HGV drivers. We

already had a shortage of more than 2,000 health workers prior to the pandemic. Since then, more EU 26 nationals have left our health service and other professions.

We also have severe skills and labour shortages in the construction and food processing sectors — in abattoirs, in butchery and on farms. To be blunt, it is a mess. The Economy Ministers of recent years have failed to anticipate the problems, failed to anticipate the impact of Brexit and failed to arrange the necessary increase in vocational skills, the shortage of which has been well known for years.

The North is suffering from not just the effects of Brexit and the particularly harsh form that it took, which was insisted upon by the DUP and its allies in the right wing of the Conservative Party, but the lack of capacity over recent years by the succession of DUP Economy Ministers to prepare our economy and labour market for the challenges that we are dealing with today. The SDLP certainly supports the motion.

Dr Aiken: I declare an interest as a member of Unite the union. That will become germane as I go on. We will not be supporting the motion. It is always a pleasure to listen to the Chair of the Economy Committee, but it is wrong to say that the shortages are a direct consequence of Brexit. To say that they are does much to undermine the view of what is happening in the global economy at the moment.

Before I continue, I take the opportunity to welcome the fact that 86,000 — I repeat, 86,000 — EU citizens have applied for leave to remain in our nation of the United Kingdom and to stay, particularly, in Northern Ireland. That should be not only a vote of confidence for the future of Northern Ireland but something that we should all welcome. Every Member will welcome those 86,000 new Northern Ireland citizens coming in and the great contribution that they are going to make to our fantastic country. Each Member will welcome not only the contribution that they have made but the contribution that such people will make for the next 100 years of Northern Ireland.

We have already heard figures, and we have heard about labour shortages in Poland, Germany, France and Italy, and all the rest of it. There are labour shortages across the globe. Let us concentrate on the EU. We have already heard about the shortfall of close to 124,000 haulage and logistics drivers in Poland, and we have heard that there is a shortage of 45,000 HGV and lorry drivers in Germany. There is a similar figure of around 45,000 in France, and,

in Italy and Spain, there is a shortfall of 15,000. Furthermore, there is a shortage of 200,000 agriculture workers in France. Those are the EU's own statistics. They are not from some sort of Tory version of 'The Daily Telegraph' view of the world. It is clear that COVID has had a huge effect on the movement of labour across the whole of the European continent.

It would not be right of us not to point out the fact that many of our skilled migrant labour comes from outside Europe. I am talking about our workers who come from the Philippines in particular. The ability to attract those workers and to retain them is vital. We, as an Assembly, should be reaching out the hand of friendship to enable that to be done. I welcome Northern Ireland's being an open place for workers, and we need to do all that we can to improve the opportunities for workers in Northern Ireland.

I move on now to the issue that is really having an impact on the situation. I made my declaration as a member of the trade union Unite. It is clear to me that the terms and conditions for workers, particularly those in the haulage and agriculture sectors, are not what they should be.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for giving way on that point. I listened to the Member who spoke previously pontificate about everyone else and what they are not doing. However, her Minister, who is responsible for driving tests, whether they are lorry or trailer tests, has been very slow in bringing in a relaxation. The UK recognised that there is a shortage of drivers and is embarking on a journey to make the test procedure easier. However, her Minister dismissed the need for that and, indeed, gave no examples of shortages of drivers and said there is no requirement for such a measure here.

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

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member for his intervention. HGV drivers and their licensing has been flagged up as an issue for some time. We knew we would have difficulties with that because of COVID, and it would have been apposite if the Infrastructure Minister had introduced such measures.

To slightly digress — of course, I have an extra minute — we are talking about trying to manoeuvre and move articulated lorries. One of my concerns is that a piece of legislation is being forced on us that means that people from GB may not be able to come to Northern

Ireland to do that work. We need to seriously ask ourselves what we are looking at.

Very clearly, we need to get to the point where we have proper wages for our agricultural workers and those in the logistics industry. They need proper terms and conditions of service. We need to invest to make sure that we have everything, including truck stops, so that it is a much more attractive business. Those are the kinds of things we need to look at.

Finally, we should encourage everybody to seriously think about what we are doing to make Northern Ireland as attractive as possible for people to come to. We have seen the benefits that migrant labour brings to Northern Ireland's health service, our agriculture sector and, as my learned friend from Strangford said earlier, our cultural industries. Those are the things we have to do. Northern Ireland is a great place to come to and live in. We should encourage that.

I thank the Chair of the Economy Committee for tabling the motion, but I do not think we are in a position to support it.

Mr Blair: It was not difficult to predict the challenges that the agriculture and haulage sectors would face as a direct result of Brexit and that action would be required. As described by a number of Members, the significant challenge at present is a shortage of labour, which is impacting on many sectors of our economy and which has been significantly exacerbated by the ending of freedom of movement that came about because of Brexit.

The UK Government have failed to meet the needs or to answer the pleas of the meat and transport industries to access migrant workers. Just days ago, the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, told the Conservative Party conference that he would not return to uncontrolled immigration to solve fuel, gas or Christmas food crises, and he suggested that such strains were part of a period of post-Brexit adjustment. Instead, the UK Government have said that it is up to businesses to deal with the labour shortages and that they should raise pay and conditions to attract local workers. Progress on that is still awaited, and the waiting is proving costly.

The UK's exit from the EU has contributed to strains in supply chains and the labour force. It has stretched everything, including fuel deliveries, and could create food shortages ahead of Christmas. A recent report by the accountancy firm Grant Thornton concluded

that there were almost one million job vacancies in the UK, half of which are in the food and drink sector. Those industries have relied heavily on an EU workforce input for the past 20 to 30 years.

Local business owners have told me that the chronic labour shortages have led to a crisis in supply chains here too, affecting a lengthening list of products. The Ulster Farmers' Union has said that the sector is desperate for staff, and according to recent figures across our food-processing industry, there is a shortfall of around 12% in the workforce. One large employer alone is struggling to fill hundreds of vacancies. Inevitably, labour shortages will push up the prices of local food products, and consumers in Northern Ireland could face a period of food price inflation.

According to a report from another accounting and professional services firm, the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC), a significant number of agri-food firms are reporting difficulties that are to do with the rising cost of recruitment and Brexit, which could lead to a hike in costs.

4.30 pm

Labour shortages could also lead to the additional issue of the slaughter of thousands of healthy pigs. Farmers in England have already been forced to kill animals to make space and ensure the continued welfare of their remaining livestock amid an ongoing shortage of workers at slaughterhouses. The National Pig Association said last week that up to 120,000 pigs might have to be culled on farms and not sold for pork meat because of a shortage of abattoir workers. Something needs to change.

Although we will do what we can through employability and skills work to address labour shortages locally, fundamentally, the answers and solutions have to lie with the UK Government. I call on them to take urgent action to ensure that the problems that are already being experienced do not get even worse as the winter progresses. The Prime Minister must stop dismissing the sector's concerns. The solutions are clear, and it is up to the UK Government to rectify the situation instead of finding further stumbling blocks and issuing new challenges. My Alliance colleagues and I support the motion.

Mr Allister: I do not in any way gainsay the fact that there are obviously considerable shortages affecting various sectors in our economy, but I take issue with the deliberate and

disingenuously opportunistic nature of the motion. When it says:

"recognises that these labour shortages are a direct consequence of Brexit",

it spins a lie, a falsehood. I certainly will not accept the motion's invitation to endorse that lie.

There have been haulage shortages and HGV shortages across Europe for at least 15 years. Anyone who has read the transport intelligence report will know that the United Kingdom is in no worse a position than parallel countries in the EU that have not exited. Figures have already been given. In 2020, there was a shortage of 124,000 HGV drivers in Poland, at least 45,000 in Germany, 43,000 in France and a total of 400,000 across Europe. Yet, the motion, in pursuit of the obsession of its authors to blame everything on Brexit, tries to spin the notion that the shortages are a direct consequence of Brexit. They were there long before Brexit. They are in countries that have not exited. It is a fallacy and a concoction to say that they are the consequences of Brexit.

Statistics show that, before Brexit, there were 45,000 EU nationals driving HGVs in the United Kingdom. Since Brexit, that figure has fallen by only 3,000. There are still 42,000 EU nationals driving HGVs in the United Kingdom. It is clear that it is not Brexit that has stoked and caused the problem; it is a multiplicity of other issues, including low wages. Now, the chief advocate for a low-wage economy in the House is Sinn Féin. It wants to flood the market with cheap labour from the EU. Where are the socialist credentials of Sinn Féin when its answer to the problem is, "Get the cheapest labour that you can. Flood the market with cheap labour, exploit the cheap labour, and that will solve it"? That is Sinn Féin's answer. What an appalling situation from those who call themselves "socialists" and boast of their alleged socialist credentials.

It wants to help and assist the importation of the cheapest labour that it can find, instead of addressing the real causes of HGV driver shortages across the EU, such as the EU's own mobility package; the lack of infrastructure and facilities, particularly for female drivers, that should be there across Europe; and the low pay that contributes to all that.

In Northern Ireland, a contributor to HGV driver shortages is the protocol. I have talked to many drivers who say, "I have stopped going to GB because I do not know whether I will be held there for 24 hours waiting for paperwork. I do not know if my lorry will be called in when I get

back because of the protocol." The protocol itself is an aggravator in this situation. I refute entirely the core contention of this opportunistic motion and throw it back to those who say, wrongly and disingenuously —.

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

Mr Allister: It is just another basis upon which to take a hit at Brexit.

Mr Carroll: It is important in this debate to discuss working conditions in those industries, because the motion does not refer to them even in passing. Like Mr Aiken, I declare an interest as a member of Unite the union. There is no doubt that the Tory-driven Brexit has had an impact on people's ability to work here, where they want to. Nefarious and nasty immigration policies that have been deployed by the Tories both before and after the referendum have made Britain a hostile place for many migrants and would-be migrants. However, to pretend that that is the sole reason for the crisis in some of those sectors would be not only fanciful but inaccurate. Anyone who speaks to workers and unions that represent HGV drivers in particular will know that some of these issues are at least 20 years in the making.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

It is the same old story of workers being ground down, disrespected, degraded and not paid enough. The working conditions for HGV drivers in particular are pretty gruelling, with workers being subjected to a driving down of terms and conditions in a race to the bottom in which all workers lose out but those who run major haulage companies rake it in, as per usual — the same as it ever was. We have a crisis where workers are not being recruited or retained. That has led to the major crisis that we all see on our TV screens. The average HGV driver is male and over 40 years of age. Most younger people with young families see the particularly long weeks of work, getting up in the middle of the night for work, and the terrible conditions, and say, "No thanks; that is not for me". Unfortunately, those problems are historical. Given that employment legislation is devolved here, I will be interested to hear what the Agriculture and Economy Ministers intend to do about those issues.

Unite the union has a drivers' manifesto. I encourage this Minister and the Economy Minister to look at it, read it and implement it. It states:

"Soft touch initiatives will do nothing to address the skills shortage in this vital industry, we must collectively not just look to how we can recruit new drivers but to change the industry to retain the ones we have and keep the new drivers we seek to recruit."

Of course, that is not to mention the problem with over-reliance on agency workers and bogus self-employment. The list goes on and on. If the Government did set industry-wide standards from which employers would not be allowed to diverge, it would benefit workers and keep more of them in place. Most workers, rightly, have access to lunch breaks and so forth, but when lorry drivers need to take a break, they often do not have somewhere to park to take a break. Lorry drivers rarely have a place to go to the toilet that is not the side of the road, and washing facilities are non-existent for most. We need to ensure that lorry drivers, like all workers, have some dignity and proper facilities in their workplace, wherever that may be from day to day.

It is quite remarkable that, for the first time ever — in my memory, certainly — the Tories are talking about supporting or improving pay and conditions for workers — HGV drivers — but only to get them over the current crisis, mind you. They have refused to tackle rogue employers and are now paying only lip service to improving conditions. I imagine that, if lorry drivers took action on the picket lines, there would not be a Tory in sight to support them, and they would be the first to lay into those essential workers.

We have to remember, however, that, in the current context, workers are in a powerful negotiating position to increase their pay and improve their terms and conditions. Workers in some companies have indicated that they are willing to take action. I stand behind any who choose to do so. The 'Financial Times' fears that the current situation could see a long-term trend that tilts the balance of negotiating power from capital towards labour.

That is exactly what we need to see happen for HGV drivers, agriculture workers and everybody else who has been ground down by employers attacking wages and conditions.

Agriculture workers and drivers are essential, but they are treated as disposable. Look at how many COVID outbreaks occurred in food plants. Those workers were largely forgotten about, but, without them, we would not have had food in our shops or on our tables. HGV drivers are essential workers and skilled workers, but they

earn an average of £11.80 an hour. Without those drivers, our society would grind to a halt. People would not get their food or online deliveries. The question of extended hours is important, and health and safety must be paramount if the Government are considering pushing ahead with extending hours.

I disagree with the motion's analysis of why we are in this position, but I agree with the calls made in it. For that reason, I support it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Edwin Poots, to respond to the debate on behalf of the Minister for the Economy. The Minister will have 15 minutes.

Mr Poots: The Minister for the Economy and I are acutely aware of the labour shortages facing the agri-food and haulage sectors.

The debate has been remarkable, given what the parties that are doing most of the complaining have had to say previously. Before Brexit happened, we had all the predictions of great doom on the way: the economy would go into free fall, and unemployment would rise rapidly. Instead, the UK's economy is the fastest-growing of any region in Europe. With a fast-growing economy and, indeed, less migration taking place, which is a consequence of the open door that existed previously in the European Union, we face some issues with labour. That is not a really bad position to be in. As a young person growing up in the 1980s, I recall the grinding unemployment that existed. Over 20% of our people were unemployed, and needing workers is a much better problem to have to deal with than needing jobs. While there has been a general tightening in the labour market and shortages in a number of sectors, online job adverts in Northern Ireland were at an all-time high in August 2021, 52% above the normal monthly tally. The demand can be seen across the whole economy, and, combined with our relatively low unemployment rate, we will undoubtedly witness friction in the labour market for some time.

The COVID pandemic, along with changes to the UK's immigration policy, has impacted on almost all parts of our economy and manifested itself in various forms, including the labour shortages that we face. Over the past few months, the Department for the Economy and my Department have seen a surge in correspondence from concerned stakeholders who are experiencing significant operational problems as a result of labour shortages. The level of concern reported by stakeholders shows no sign of subsiding, and the Economy

Minister and I continue to engage with industry and the UK Government with a view to ensuring that the Government's immigration policy reflects the needs of Northern Ireland's economy.

Information from industry suggests that there are staffing shortages of up to 35% in certain critical food-processing occupations. According to the labour force survey statistics, migrant workers made up 10% of the total employment in the agri-food sector in 2020, which was down from 20.6% in 2019. There is clearly a significant decrease that officials will continue to monitor. There is also a shortage of 60,000 to 76,000 drivers in the UK and, according to the Road Haulage Association, of 4,000 to 5,000 in Northern Ireland. It is important to recognise, however, that that is not only a Great Britain and Northern Ireland problem; for instance, issues around pay and poor working conditions mean that many EU countries face similar HGV driver shortages. The shortage across Europe is estimated at 400,000, with Poland requiring 124,000, Germany between 45,000 and 60,000 and France around 43,000.

Where is the superabundance of workers in the European Union to fill those roles that Members have indicated?

The motion tabled by Dr Archibald is worded in such a way that it presents the ruinous policy around Brexit as the cause of all of the problems, and it suggests that these problems exist only in the United Kingdom. Let us deal with the facts as opposed to Sinn Féin spin, of which we have certainly heard plenty today.

4.45 pm

In Italy, there is an issue with getting grape pickers — that is not related to the United Kingdom, because not an awful lot of grapes grow here — and tomato pickers. Italy has a plenitude of tomatoes. Again, this is in Italy:

"Among the critical issues of this controversial commercial campaign are the difficulty in finding skilled and unskilled seasonal labor, even if we are talking about hires with regular contracts and union pay. As a result, personnel and transport costs have also risen, due to the shortage of truck drivers along the logistics chain. Transport is one of the main concerns".

The European Commission had said that the proportion of construction companies reporting that a lack of workers was limiting their activities hit a record 27% in its latest survey. The

German Freight Forwarding and Logistics Association has warned of a shortage of more than 60,000 truck drivers and said that it expects that to increase by 15,000 a year. If you do not believe me, surely you will believe the European Commission when it says that.

In Ireland, that bastion of good — Sinn Féin thinks that everything is perfect there — the chairman of the IFA national pigs committee, Roy Gallie, is calling on the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment to fast-track work permit applications from outside the European Union. He said that the Irish:

"pig meat sector is under extreme pressure due to a lack of suitable labour at processing level and on farms".

Remarkably enough, we kill thousands of pigs from the Republic of Ireland every year and process them every week, yet those folks across the way would have us believe that all of the problems exist here and do not exist in the rest of Europe.

It is always good to see a fresh face coming into the Assembly. However, it all went so sour so quickly when the fresh-faced Member just regurgitated a speech written by back-room Sinn Féin staff that bore a resemblance not to factuality but to Sinn Féin's spin doctoring.

Mr K Buchanan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: Yes, certainly.

Mr K Buchanan: You refer to the speech from the Member across the way. At one point, I was using my fingers and then my toes to count the DUP references, and then I had to stop. It is probably a good way to start: fill in "DUP" and just put words in between. I congratulate the Member opposite for promoting the party.

There has been negativity in today's debate. It has been about Brexit, Brexit, Brexit. I do not think that other Members have done their research on the issues that other countries have. Those issues are not down to Brexit. I am sure that the Minister will agree that COVID has been an issue. Workers have moved around different sectors. In Mid Ulster, there has been a pool of movement as workers moved from food processing to engineering. We need to get the Brexit notion out of people's heads and look at the real issues across Europe, not just in this part of the United Kingdom.

Mr Delargy: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: Sorry; I will respond to this intervention first.

I thank the Member for pointing out the reality that this is not purely about Brexit. The Members opposite have failed miserably in their attempts to spin this. In the Republic of Ireland, the Department responsible is conducting a review of non-EEA work permit systems. The mushroom sector is at breaking point when it comes to labour and continues to experience severe labour shortages. This is in the Republic of Ireland. There is a shortage of skilled, semi-skilled and manual labour for the sector, and that is having a serious effect on the efficiency of businesses and the subsequent viability of the sector.

I look forward to hearing some actual thoughts from this Member, instead of —.

Mr Delargy: Mr Poots, my response to what you said is that the speech was written by me. I noticed that — I can see your notes from across the Chamber — in contrast, you were reading notes from your officials. You clearly do not have a great understanding of them. You have given details of isolated incidents from countries around Europe. I particularly enjoyed the fact that, when you spoke about pigs coming from the South of Ireland, your notes had to have pictures of pigs to remind you of what parts you were talking about.

Your whole intervention has been ludicrous. Anything that you pointed out were isolated incidents. Again, I would like to remind you that, if you are going to bring up those points, please, at least, have examples that show some credibility and joined-up thinking.

Mr Poots: I love the interventions, to be perfectly honest. So, a shortage of 400,000 drivers in the European Union is an isolated incident. Let us get real here. You have come out of schoolboy politics into the real world, and it does not stack up if you say that a shortage of 400,000 drivers is an isolated incident.

The Member mentioned the Agricultural Wages Board. For years, the Assembly has talked about dispensing with needless quangos, and this is a needless quango. We have a minimum wage, but, leaving that to one side, the wages in the agriculture sector are currently well above the minimum wage for most people, and demand is very high. Why do we need a body to say, "You need to give them this amount of wages" when people are earning bigger wages than that in the first instance? It is a relic of the past when agricultural wages were poor.

Thankfully, that has gone, and, if the Member knew anything about agriculture, he would know that that is the case.

When it comes to Brexit and immigration policy, it is important to note that immigration has not ended. The ending of free movement of people allows the UK to determine who can work in the UK according to the needs of the economy. The points-based immigration system caters for skilled workers, students and a range of other specialist work routes, including routes for global leaders in their field and innovators from all over the world. However, I agree that the immigration system needs changes in order for it to work for Northern Ireland. Therefore, the Economy Minister and I have been making representations to the UK Government on the need for derogations for Northern Ireland. We need a shortage occupations list for Northern Ireland, a relaxation of the English language requirement and the flexibility that short-term visas can bring. It is welcome that the UK Government have announced that they will issue 5,000 temporary visas for HGV drivers and 5,500 visas for poultry workers in the run-up to Christmas, but it is clear that that is not enough and will not solve the wider labour supply issues that we face. That will be possible only with further changes to immigration policy.

I will turn to skills. The Home Office continues to promote the employment of the domestic workforce and investment in economic development and training as a solution to the UK's labour supply problems. While I support that aspiration, I also understand that, for the haulage and food sectors, that cannot be implemented immediately and a phased approach is more likely to succeed. I recognise that we have an assured skills academy and that, currently, HGV skills academies are being delivered by Belfast City Council and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, with a number of other councils seeking to use the model in order to offer their own HGV training. It would be really helpful if the Department for Infrastructure were able to move a bit faster to assist with examinations for HGV drivers.

I know that Ms McLaughlin, for example, wants to blame the DUP for the issues around skills. Again, she is relatively new to the Assembly, but she has been here long enough to understand that what she says has to bear up to facts. She talked about the DUP being in charge of skills for some 14 years. Well, the Department for Employment and Learning was responsible for skills until 2016 when it ceased to be, and that remit was transferred to the Department for the Economy. The DUP has had roughly two and a half years in the

Department for the Economy since then because Sinn Féin thought that it was a good idea not to have an Assembly for three years. Prior to that, the Department for Employment and Learning was looked after by the SDLP in the first instance, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party. So, if there is a problem with what went on in the past, she will find that it exists with her party and two other parties, but not the Democratic Unionist Party in that instance.

I can assure all Members that, while immigration is an excepted matter, the Economy Minister and I will continue to press the UK Government to introduce the changes that we need in order for immigration policy to work for the Northern Ireland economy. More broadly, in order to modernise our skills system, a consultation on a new skills strategy, Skills for a 10X Economy, concluded in mid-August, and officials are working across government and with key stakeholders to develop the final strategy, which reflects consultation responses.

When complete, Skills for a 10X Economy will help to ensure that Northern Ireland's citizens and business community have access to the modern, economically active and relevant skills that will empower them to reach their full potential, improving Northern Ireland's competitiveness on a global stage.

I would like to make it clear that the Economy Minister and I welcome the contribution that migrants from the EU and further afield have made, and will continue to make, to the economy and to wider society. I am delighted that so many EU nationals have applied to the EU Settlement Scheme in Northern Ireland and that they will continue to be based here.

I conclude by saying that, when it comes to all of this, not being in the European Union gives us a solution that the Republic of Ireland, Italy and others do not have. We can go to the world market to address the labour shortages that have been identified. Although I am totally opposed to uncontrolled immigration, which is one of the reasons that I supported Brexit —

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Mr Poots: — I am very happy to support immigration on the basis of need.

Ms Dolan: I welcome the opportunity to make a winding-up speech. I will briefly go through some Members' contributions, and then I will make my own contribution.

I will start with remarks from my colleague the Chair of the Economy Committee, Caoimhe Archibald. She highlighted the fact that people are here to work but are also here to make a life and be part of our communities. Caoimhe also made the point that nothing shocks us any more when it comes to the Tories' disregard for the North. Our agri-food sector cannot be used as collateral damage when it comes to Brexit. Caoimhe also mentioned the importance of skills development for all sectors, not just agri-food.

Keith Buchanan from the DUP obviously spoke of his opposition to the motion. He spoke of some measures that the Agriculture and Economy Ministers have taken to tackle the issue, but if we do not have the people here, those measures are kind of redundant.

Matthew O'Toole from the SDLP described it as a "silly argument" to say that the labour shortage is not as a result of Brexit. I find myself agreeing with Matthew. He questioned the attitude of the British Government to successive letters sent by DUP Ministers, and he described the issue as a "societal tragedy" rather than just an economic problem.

Mike Nesbitt outlined his opposition to the motion, due to the wording being "too narrow".

Stewart Dickson supported the motion on behalf of the Alliance Party. He said that we should not be picking up the pieces of Brexit. That is what is happening, however, because a major source of workforce was cut off from the North overnight. He mentioned the impact on hospitality, and Sinead McLaughlin mentioned the impact on the construction sector, so the impact is not just on the agri-food sector. Stewart highlighted the fact that the impact on the hospitality industry is that just as that industry is beginning to recover, it is being restricted by the number of workers who are available.

Stewart also said that there is no competition between robots and humans. I can back that up with a small example. I got my car washed by a robot on Friday night, and I can assure you that it was nothing compared to what the fellas at the car wash used to do. That is just a small example of the impact that this could have. Stewart also said that, to achieve the high-wage, high-skills economy that we all want, we need to invest in our people. He reiterated calls on the Economy and Agriculture Ministers to speak up for the North.

My colleague Pádraig Delargy said that the DUP position does not add up and that, as a

result of Brexit, we are in a position where we may no longer have access to EU funding, some of which was used to train people up for those jobs. He said that actions speak louder than words and used three examples, one of which was that he asked the Economy Minister to extend the Spend Local card to 16- and 17-year-olds but that call has been repeatedly rejected.

Stephen Dunne focused on issues faced by the haulage industry and said that the Economy and Agriculture Ministers are interested in action rather than words. I look forward to that action.

Sinead McLaughlin supported the motion on behalf of the SDLP. She pointed out the failure of the DUP and the Department for the Economy. She said that investment in education and skills has decreased over the past 10 years and questioned the DUP's understanding of the impact of the Brexit that they championed. She described it as "a mess", and I agree with that.

Steve Aiken does not support the motion. He says that 86,000 EU citizens applied to remain in the North and that they should be welcomed. We welcome them with open arms.

He described the benefits that migrant labour brings, and nobody disputes those. I find myself agreeing with Steve, which does not always happen. He said we need to improve opportunities for workers, as well as their terms and conditions, because they are not as they should be.

5.00 pm

John Blair said that the situation is a direct result of Brexit. That is true. The UFU says that the sector is desperate, and one employer alone has hundreds of vacancies to fill. The labour shortage has resulted in price hikes and animal culls.

Jim Allister, obviously, does not support the motion, and he does not blame Brexit. I must point out that Sinn Féin wants a living wage for all workers. We do not want cheap labour. Had Jim listened to my colleague, he would know that our living wage campaign was mentioned. However, I agree with Jim that there is a lack of facilities for women drivers. At the Finance Committee a couple of weeks ago, we had a briefing about that. Funnily enough, Jim said that the protocol is an aggravator, and it is, but where did it come from? It came from Brexit, so

you just answered your own question there, Jim.

Gerry Carroll shares my concerns on terms and conditions —.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Dolan: No, I want to get through this, thanks. Gerry Carroll shares my concerns about terms and conditions for workers, and he, too, focused on HGV drivers.

Mr Carroll: Will the Member give way briefly?

Ms Dolan: Yes, go on ahead. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Carroll: It is her choice.

Does the Member agree that it is very concerning, inaccurate and dangerous to suggest that workers coming from Europe or elsewhere in the world have a role in driving down wages? Workers do not drive down wages; nefarious, chancer employers do that.

Ms Dolan: Yes, I completely agree with that. Gerry also spoke of the COVID outbreaks in food factories and how the workers were forgotten about. I represent Fermanagh and South Tyrone, where we have a number of food factories, and that was the case there. I heard that from several people. Gerry supports the motion.

I must say I was so disheartened by the way the Minister spoke. I found him using bully-boy tactics, attacking younger Members, newer Members and those who are not experienced. How do you expect people to come into the Chamber when you are going to treat them like that, just because you have been here for, oh, however long? I find that really disappointing. The fact that a Minister talks to MLAs like that is so disheartening. I lost concentration during your contribution because of the way that you spoke to Sinead and Pádraig. It really disappointed me. I will leave it at that. You said that you do not think we are in a bad position and that we think everything is perfect in the Twenty-six Counties. No, we do not, but we see that the solution to fixing the problems is a united Ireland.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for taking an intervention, and I concur with her comments about the AERA Minister. He gave a number of examples of labour shortages, but he did not take an intervention from me, when I would have made the point that we do not see empty shelves across Europe. We see them in Britain

as a direct result of labour shortages because of Brexit. A point was made about workers' terms and conditions. I imagine that we would all concur with thinking they are too poor. We would like to see the Economy Minister meet the New Decade, New Approach obligations on employment and workers' rights. Perhaps he could put a wee bit of pressure on his Executive colleagues.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Member.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. She says that she and her party see the solution to the difficulties that we have in Northern Ireland to be what she calls a "united Ireland". How will that be paid for, given that, prior to COVID, the Republic of Ireland Government could not meet their commitments to the European Union, never mind to the World Bank?

Ms Dolan: We have spoken about this. It will be a new and united Ireland. There are economic documents on it, and I can provide you with one if you want.

Those are my remarks on the debate, and I will add a couple as the Sinn Féin spokesperson on workers' rights. As I said, Brexit has resulted in skilled EU workers leaving the North through the British Government's reckless decision to end freedom of movement. That is the hard Brexit championed by the DUP, which Boris Johnson is now trying to sell as a plan. He says the shortages are all part of the move to a high-wage economy. The truth is that Boris is a man without a plan. He and his Brexiteers have no idea what they are doing or where the disastrous hard Brexit is going to go next. When it comes to the North, the fact is that they do not even care.

However, notable points have come out of this. I am relieved that we are finally beginning to realise the importance and value of our low-skilled workers. Without the workers in our agri-food sector, we would not be able to compete on the world stage with our high-quality and award-winning produce, which is what we are experiencing now. If those workers are so vital to our economy, why were they never treated as such?

Sinn Féin has a strong track record of protecting workers and their rights across this island. I am lobbying for the introduction of a pilot scheme for a four-day working week. I also have a private Member's Bill in progress that would abolish zero-hours contracts.

Colleagues are progressing private Members' Bills and campaigning on a living wage, the right to disconnect and outlawing bogus self-employment, to name a few.

I welcome the DUP's conversion to being champions of workers' rights. They have never been in support of comprehensive and far-reaching legislation to support rights and fair pay for workers. As my colleague Pádraig Delargy MLA pointed out and I think it is important to repeat, 10 years of DUP Economy Ministers have resulted in wages in the North being the lowest across these islands. Maybe with this realisation, workers and their families may actually begin to get a break. As Sinn Féin spokesperson on employment and workers' rights, I certainly hope so.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 48; Noes 37.

AYES

Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Á Murphy, Mr C Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Delargy and Ms Kimmins

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Erskine, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr K Buchanan and Mr Clarke

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the impact that labour shortages are having in the agri-food and haulage sectors locally and in Britain; acknowledges that these sectors relied on EU labour; recognises that these labour shortages are a direct consequence of Brexit and the end to freedom of movement for EU workers; believes that the British Government need to act urgently to address labour shortages and enable EU citizens to come here to work and live; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to make clear to the British Government the significant impact labour shortages are having on the local economy and the need to rectify the situation.

Mr Speaker: I thank everybody for their participation in the debate.

Adjourned at 5.27 pm.

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