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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 12 February 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Committee Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson: Resignations and Appointments

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to today's business, I inform Members that I have been notified by the nominating officer of the Alliance Party that Danny Donnelly has replaced Nuala McAllister as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health and that Stewart Dickson has replaced Danny Donnelly as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Standards and Privileges. The appointments took effect on 7 February 2024.

I have been notified by the nominating officer for Sinn Féin that Philip McGuigan replaced Declan Kearney as Chairperson of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee from 9 February 2024. Sinn Féin's nominating officer has also confirmed that Declan McAleer has replaced Pádraig Delargy as Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and that Carál Ní Chuilín has been appointed as Chairperson of the Committee for Standards and Privileges, both effective from today, 12 February 2024.

I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met.

Executive Committee Business

**Social Security (Terminal Illness)
Bill: Royal Assent**

**Financial Reporting (Departments
and Public Bodies) Bill: Royal
Assent**

**Animal Welfare (Service Animals)
Bill: Royal Assent**

**Organ and Tissue Donation (Deemed
Consent) Bill: Royal Assent**

Charities Bill: Royal Assent

**Non-domestic Rates Valuations
(Coronavirus) Bill: Royal Assent**

Mr Speaker: Before we move to the first item of business, I wish to inform the Assembly that, since dissolution of the previous Assembly in March 2022, a number of Bills have received Royal Assent.

The following Bills received Royal Assent on 30 March 2022 and became Acts: Social Security (Terminal Illness), Chapter 7; Financial Reporting (Departments and Public Bodies), Chapter 8; Animal Welfare (Service Animals), Chapter 9; Organ and Tissue Donation (Deemed Consent), Chapter 10; Charities, Chapter 11; and Non-domestic Rates Valuations (Coronavirus), Chapter 12.

Private Members' Business

Autism (Amendment) Bill: Royal Assent

Integrated Education Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: The following Bills received Royal Assent on 26 April 2022 and became Acts: Autism (Amendment), Chapter 13; and Integrated Education, Chapter 15.

Executive Committee Business

Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (Amendment) Bill: Royal Assent

Motor Vehicles (Compulsory Insurance) Bill: Royal Assent

Protection from Stalking Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: The following Bills received Royal Assent on 26 April 2022 and became Acts: Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (Amendment), Chapter 14; Motor Vehicles (Compulsory Insurance), Chapter 16; and Protection from Stalking, Chapter 17.

Adoption and Children Bill (NIA Bill 37/17-22): Royal Assent

Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Bill: Royal Assent

Private Tenancies Bill: Royal Assent

School Age Bill: Royal Assent

Welfare Supplementary Payments (Amendment) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: The following Bills received Royal Assent on 27 April 2022 and became Acts: Adoption and Children, Chapter 18; Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims), Chapter 19; Private Tenancies, Chapter 20; School Age, Chapter 21; and Welfare Supplementary Payments (Amendment), Chapter 22.

Private Members' Business

**Fair Employment (School Teachers)
Bill: Royal Assent**

**Hospital Parking Charges Bill: Royal
Assent**

**Period Products (Free Provision)
Bill: Royal Assent**

**Preservation of Documents Bill:
Royal Assent**

**Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill:
Royal Assent**

Mr Speaker: The following Bills received Royal Assent on 12 May 2022 and became Acts: Fair Employment (School Teachers), Chapter 23; Hospital Parking Charges, Chapter 24; Period Products (Free Provision), Chapter 25; Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions), Chapter 26; and Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave), Chapter 27.

Executive Committee Business

**Support for Mortgage Interest etc.
(Security for Loans) Bill: Royal
Assent**

**General Teaching Council
(Directions) Bill: Royal Assent**

Mr Speaker: The following Bills received Royal Assent on 6 June 2022 and became Acts: Support for Mortgage Interest etc (Security for Loans), Chapter 28; and General Teaching Council (Directions), Chapter 29.

Private Members' Business

Defamation Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: The Defamation Bill received Royal Assent on 6 June 2022 and became an Act. It is Chapter 30.

Executive Committee Business

Climate Change (No. 2) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: The Climate change (No. 2) Bill received Royal Assent on 6 June 2022 and became the Climate Change Act. It is Chapter 31.

Private Members' Business

Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: The Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill received Royal Assent and became an Act on 6 February 2023. It is Chapter 1.

Members' Statements

Mr Speaker: For the benefit of Members who are new to the Assembly, I will provide a brief outline of how Members' Statements are managed in a plenary sitting. If Members wish to make a statement, they should rise in their place. Members who are called will have up to three minutes in which to make their statement. Any Member whose statement is not compliant with the provisions of Standing Order 24A will be asked to resume their seat. Standing Orders provide that, when selecting a Member to make a statement, I shall have regard to the balance of opinions in the Assembly. I shall therefore ensure that, in any period set aside for this business, I select Members from a range of parties. However, it is unavoidable that there will be occasions on which it will not be possible in the time available to select all Members who wish to make a statement, and, as with all items of business, it is not in order to challenge my selection. I will ensure that, over time, all Members who wish to make a statement have a fair opportunity to do so.

Members should note that statements will not be subject to debate or questioning, interventions will not be permitted, and I will not take points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished. If that is clear, I will begin.

Loughgall Football Club: 100th Birthday of Hilbert Willis

Mr Buckley: I rise on a celebratory note first thing this Monday afternoon, because I attended a "first" this weekend alongside my Assembly colleague Tom Elliott. That was to celebrate the 100th birthday of Loughgall Football Club living legend, Hilbert Willis. It is a remarkable achievement for anybody to reach the 100th year milestone, but Hilbert is not an ordinary man. He has put his life, heart and soul into Loughgall Football Club, serving for some 30 years as its groundsman, 10 years as its chairman and is still active to this very day. Most recently, Hilbert wanted to put his best foot forward to raise funds for the club during COVID-19 by completing 100 laps of the pitch. He was joined by visiting dignitaries from football clubs across Northern Ireland. I know that he is held in high esteem across the sporting community.

Hilbert has had a long and enduring life. Born in February 1924, he has seen such an array of changes throughout his time on earth. When we look at Northern Ireland in that way, we see that

Hilbert has lived through much of its existence. He told me on Saturday that he remembers ploughing the fields with the horses. His is a remarkable mind, and he is a remarkable individual. I know that the House will join me in wishing him well as he celebrates his 100th year.

For the avoidance of doubt, Hilbert will probably be tuning in to the comments that have been made about him not only in the House but across the sporting spectrum. Liam Beckett was MC at Loughgall Football Club as it put on an event for Hilbert on Saturday. We were shocked at just how mindful people across the sporting community, from all backgrounds, were of Hilbert's significant achievement.

The Hilbert Willis Stand now stands proudly at Loughgall Football Club. I am told that he has not yet missed a game this year. In all weather conditions, Hilbert Willis is an icon and a legend at Loughgall Football Club. I will finish with the football chant that is now usual at Loughgall: "There is only one Hilbert Willis".

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Mr Buckley. That was well within the three minutes, and I encourage Members to do likewise, because it will ensure that as many as possible get in.

Unpaid and Informal Carers

Mr Gildernew: I thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, for providing me with the opportunity to make what I believe to be a very important statement about the support or, indeed, the lack of support, that we provide to unpaid or informal carers.

It is clear that, even before COVID, there were serious pressures in that sector in providing support. Unpaid carers provide up to a third of all care in the North. The entire health and social care system would literally collapse without those carers, and the danger is that we are overseeing a system in which individual carers are collapsing and care is breaking down as a result of unsustainable pressure.

In relation to adult respite services and complex needs in particular, in my constituency, in Dungannon, Woodlawn House, an eight-bed unit, had to close before Christmas as a result of inadequate provision for the sector. Immediately, eight families had their respite cancelled. They had nowhere to send their loved one for that period. That is absolutely no reflection on the staff throughout the health and social care system or those in Woodlawn House, who try to do the best that they can in

the face of huge pressure, but staff vacancies are too great, and there is not enough recruitment and retention.

We urgently need to see staff getting the pay that they deserve, to deal with that retention and recruitment issue, but we also need to plan for better respite services. A full one third of informal, unpaid carers have received no respite whatever over the past 12 months. The 'State of Caring' report by Carers NI demonstrates that that leads to much worse outcomes for them in their mental health, physical health and loneliness. All those issues provide a challenge to them.

I ask the Minister of Health and any Department or Minister with a role in relation to carers to look at that. I hope that we can put in place in this mandate some additional support for our badly pressed carers.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Diagnosis and Treatment

Ms Bradshaw: I rise to talk about an issue about which I receive a lot of communication in my constituency office: the lack of commissioned services in health and social care trusts for the diagnosis and treatment of people with ADHD.

I am sure that many others in the Chamber will also have been contacted by people who are frustrated that they have been unable to secure a diagnosis through their local trust, leaving them with two main options. The first is that they can go on a waiting list. In my area, a child or young person can expect to wait for five and a half years in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. Last week, I heard from a constituent that they had been advised that the waiting list for adults has now grown to eight years.

The other option for people is to seek a private diagnosis. We know that that option, when delivered in line with National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidance, can cost up to £1,800. Many people have told me that they have had to borrow that money, causing great financial hardship to themselves and their family, just to obtain a diagnosis. It should also be noted that even many private providers have closed their books, such is their backlog for new assessments. Those with a private diagnosis are not that much further forward. They then require a shared care agreement between their GP and their private consultant. The vast majority of GPs are reluctant to enter into those agreements, as

there is a substantial risk from the medication, which is on the amber list. The people with private diagnoses are forced to pay privately again for their review appointments and their medication.

I have spoken to the leadership of all the health and social care trusts about the issue. They would all like to deliver an ADHD assessment and treatment service. However, it has not been commissioned by the Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG), which is the commissioning body in the Department of Health.

The societal impact from the lack of diagnosis, treatment and care is far-reaching. Parents have told me about their struggle to support their children through their primary and post-primary education and to deal with high levels of anxiety and difficulty with concentration. Students coming to study at Queen's University Belfast, which is in my constituency, have told me about their inability to find a GP who will allow for the continuation of prescriptions for their medication, which has stabilised their condition for many years in their home country.

It is worth reflecting on what happens when we get it right. One man recently told me that, when he was able to find the correct medication for his condition, he was able to significantly grow his business and take on more staff. We have to get the issue sorted in order to allow the trusts to recruit and/or train suitably qualified psychiatrists and to get their services up and running. We cannot lose any more time in the commissioning process.

12.15 pm

Danske Bank Closures

Mr Stewart: On Friday, customers of the Carrickfergus branch of Danske Bank, and of branches in several other locations across Northern Ireland, received word that their branch will close in June. That is devastating news for Carrickfergus High Street and for retail banking throughout east Antrim. In the past five years, five high street bank branches have closed in Carrickfergus, as have 10 others across Larne and Newtownabbey collectively.

When I spoke to a representative of Danske Bank on Friday, he told me that customers should not worry and that their accounts would be seamlessly transferred to the Abbey Centre branch nine miles away. That is little comfort, I am sure, to the many elderly customers who rely on branch access for deposits and

withdrawals on a daily basis. When I pointed that out to him, I was told that customers could use post offices to make deposits and withdrawals, but he was clearly unaware that Carrickfergus town centre no longer has a post office since the last one closed over a year ago.

It is wholly unacceptable to assume or demand that every single banking customer will use online banking. Elderly and disabled customers, businesses, charities and many other organisations rely on branch access, yet branches are rapidly disappearing from our towns and villages. Last year, the UK Government passed the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023, but that has failed to address bank closures across the UK — a number that totals hundreds each month. A recent report from Advice NI found that 90% of the population use a bank at some point in the year and that 40% use a local branch at least once a month, but, despite the assurances and platitudes from well-prepared PR teams, the reality is that the banking industry simply does not care about customers. If it did, it would not be closing branches at the speed that it is doing so.

We need an incentive and a legal requirement for a minimum level of local branch access for our banking customers. We all know the pre-rehearsed arguments that banks make. They say that cash use is significantly down since 2015 and that branches and ATMs are less profitable. However, banks are not charities. In fact, they are far from it; they are hugely profitable organisations. For example, Danske Bank, which has announced this closure, had a pre-tax profit of £103 million last year, and the banking industry has collectively netted profits of £17 billion since 2015. With such massive windfalls, surely the industry can afford to maintain a basic level of cash access network.

I have written to the Minister for the Economy to ask him to work with Ministers in Westminster to put more pressure on banks to stop the never-ending closures, starting with the Danske Bank in Carrickfergus. I also call on the Minister and everyone in the Chamber to support the volunteers who are ready and waiting to set up a series of community banks across our towns and villages. They are dedicated to providing sustainable, not-for-profit banking at the heart of our communities, even if the big institutions are not.

Regional Economic Imbalance

Ms McLaughlin: Last week was a period of profound and historic change in Northern Ireland, yet, for all the change that has been

brought to the Assembly, the change that I will focus on is the change that is needed for our economy. I was glad to hear the First Minister note the importance of regional balance last week, because the truth is that the effect of the Government's economic investment strategy over the past two decades has been to let the areas that have done well do even better. That has resulted in profound imbalances in our economy and a postcode lottery for jobs and opportunity.

The difference in the level of employment and economic inactivity between the highest-performing regions and the lowest-performing regions is around 10%, and there is still a huge disparity in the levels of earnings and disposable income between people in different places. In places like north Belfast and west Belfast, the levels of poverty are the highest anywhere in Northern Ireland. Places like Fermanagh are starved of infrastructure development, and, yes, Derry and the north-west city region are still without a university of the size that was promised, without the investment that has been pledged and without the jobs that are so badly needed.

However, I did not get involved in politics because of how bad things are in Derry; I got involved because of how good things could be. Derry and the wider city region is the only metropolitan urban area of scale outside Belfast that is able to compete with cities across this island, but, more than that, to invest in Derry is to invest in the whole of the economy, since it is there that special intervention will have the most transformative impact.

The opportunity before us is huge. Making the most of that opportunity will not happen overnight, but neither will it happen by accident.

It requires deliberate and proactive policies and interventions. It requires affirmative action to address the decades of neglect. It requires positive discrimination to tilt the balance of the economy and ensure that everyone has a fair chance to succeed.

That positive discrimination must take the form of legislation. Therefore, I will propose a new law that will change the way in which this place works so that we finally prioritise regional balance in jobs, skills and investment. The legislation will create binding targets for Departments and provide accountability for our Government. It will finally reform Invest NI and expand higher education provision in the north-west.

As the mandate starts, let us resolve that it will not be the same as the last. We need to change the approach if we are to rebalance the economy. Warm words alone about regional balance just will not cut it.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms McLaughlin: Even commitments in the Programme for Government will not be enough.

Mr Speaker: Resume your seat, please.

Ms McLaughlin: We have heard and seen them all before. Let us get this done.

A5: Upgrade

Ms Brogan: I take my first opportunity to speak in the restored Assembly to raise the importance of having the A5 road upgrade delivered as a matter of urgency. First, I would like to welcome the commitment from Michelle O'Neill in her inaugural address as First Minister that delivery of the A5 road upgrade is a priority for the newly established Executive. I also welcome Infrastructure Minister John O'Dowd's commitment and determination to progress the A5 and prioritise its delivery.

Unfortunately, due to legal challenges by a small minority, there have been significant delays to this project. I join others in urging those objectors to reconsider their challenges and instead consider how deadly that road is and think of the many lives that have been lost and the people and communities that have been left devastated by the death of loved ones because that road is simply not fit for purpose.

I raised the issue of the safety of the A5 in the previous Assembly mandate, following the deaths of three young men over Christmas 2021. I am saddened to say that the road has taken more lives since then, again with families in our communities having been torn apart with devastating loss. It is the heartbreaking reality that, until the A5 is upgraded and made safe for users, it will continue to take lives.

The recent public inquiry reflected the widespread support for the A5 upgrade from the local community, business leaders and the many families who have been affected by the loss of loved ones on that road. I take this opportunity to commend and thank Tyrone GAA for the work that it has done through its Enough is Enough campaign and its participation in the public inquiry. The Enough is Enough campaign was successful in raising awareness of the dangers of the A5. It highlighted the devastating

impact that the loss of life on the A5 road has had on individual families and local communities, and it expressed the urgency that is required to deliver the upgrade.

I also pay tribute to and thank all the families who have lost loved ones on the A5 for their contributions to the inquiry and their determination to ensure that the project is completed. They have shown great strength and dignity through difficult times. We cannot accept any more delays to the upgrade of the A5. I look forward to working with the Executive to ensure the delivery of the A5 and again urge those who have so far delayed progress of the development to reconsider their objections.

Steven Davis MBE: Retirement

Mr Dunne: Congratulations, Mr Speaker, on your elevation.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to one of our all-time footballing greats, who has recently retired from professional football: Mr Steven Davis MBE. He will go down in history as one of Northern Ireland's greatest ever footballers — up there with the late, great George Best; the safe pair of hands, Pat Jennings; and our record goalscorer, David Healy. It is fitting and appropriate that his recent retirement from professional football be marked in the House today.

During his remarkable career, Steven earned 140 caps for Northern Ireland, playing for his country for almost 20 years since his debut back in 2005. Steven is also the most capped British player in the history of football, which is an exceptional achievement for a player from our wee country. Steven Davis has always been an outstanding professional, role model and exceptionally gifted footballing talent, who has inspired so many people throughout his glittering career. Steven was rightly honoured with an MBE by the late Her Majesty The Queen for services to football back in 2017. He is greatly admired across the football fraternity in Northern Ireland and beyond, and has given us all so many great memories over the years, not least leading our country to qualification and into battle in the European championships in France back in 2016; an unforgettable experience and journey for so many of us.

Steven also enjoyed a very successful club career, chalking up 742 club appearances in top-flight football in England and Scotland, winning trophies with his boyhood club, Glasgow Rangers, and excelling for many years

in the Premier League with top clubs such as Southampton, Fulham and Aston Villa.

Thank you for your incredible service, Steven Davies MBE, and enjoy a well-earned break. I have no doubt that Steven will continue to make a major contribution to football in Northern Ireland for many years to come.

Glen GAC: All-Ireland Club Championship

Ms Sheerin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus comhghairdeas leat faoi do phost nua. Thank you, Mr Speaker, and congratulations on your new role. I offer my congratulations to another group of people as well: the team, management, committee and everybody else associated with Watty Graham's GAC An Ghleann. They successfully lifted the Andy Merrigan Cup just three weeks ago, on 21 January. It is the first time that they have won an all-Ireland club championship and it is a massive achievement for everybody associated with Glen.

The buzz around the town in the lead-up to the game and since has been palpable, and celebrations went beyond Maghera, heading further up the Fivemile Straight than they really should have. However, the win has given everybody in Derry and everybody associated with GAA, I suppose, across Ulster a lift and gives inspiration to those of us in Ballinascreen, who have not won a county title since 1973, that it may be possible for us as well. I just want to offer Glen congratulations and reiterate our support.

COVID 19 Vaccine

Mr Frew: Gandhi, I think it was, said:

"The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members."

This Chamber — the elected Members in it — is supposed to represent society. Yet it turns its face away and tries to ignore a certain type of people who have been seriously injured and bereaved. Of course, I talk about the COVID-19 vaccine injured and bereaved. Over the past two years, I have met people who have lost loved ones and who have been seriously damaged. They live with that damage every day, to the point where some wish to take their own life. However, what hurts them just as much as their injuries is the fact that, when they try to gain assistance from their MLAs and MPs,

they are given the cold shoulder. They are ignored or gaslit. That is not acceptable. For as long as the history of man and medicine, we have known that medicine can cause side effects and adverse reactions. Why do so many people in the House turn their face away from people who have serious injuries that just happen to be from medicine? Why do you turn your face away from those people?

I have worked extremely hard with the support groups, in Northern Ireland and in the UK: VIBS-NI (Vaccine Injured and Bereaved Support, Northern Ireland) and UK CV Family and Vaccine Injured Bereaved UK. They do tremendous work to support those people, some of whom have injuries that leave the medical profession completely flummoxed. The profession just does not know what way to go or how to create a care pathway for those people. They need your support, they need people to represent them and they are being ignored.

An event was to be held in this place for VIBS-NI, but parties here, Sinn Féin and the SDLP, blocked it. Alliance told the group that this is not the place for them and that they should meet in a community centre. I ask now and plead with every Member of the House to search their heart and give those people the recognition and acknowledgement that they deserve.

Job Cuts: Enniskillen

Mr Elliott: I wish to raise the proposed job cuts in Enniskillen by BT and EE.

Mr Speaker: A Question for Urgent Oral Answer has been accepted on that matter so, in principle, Mr Elliott, you can speak to that matter later, if you do not mind.

12.30 pm

Assembly Committees

Mr Allister: Yesterday in North Antrim, we buried one of the greats of our education system. I refer to the sudden, sad passing of Mr Tom Skelton, the principal of Dalriada School in Ballymoney. Mr Skelton epitomised everything that a headmaster should be through the leadership, the vigour and the vision with which he led Dalriada. The indelible mark that he has made for good on so many generations of children will live long after him. I want to put on the record our sympathy to his wife, his four children, his sister and the wider family. We have truly lost a great in North Antrim.

I turn to the discrimination against minority voices in the Assembly in regard to the Committee allocations. Last week, we had a carve-up by the main parties and then an offer of the crumbs to the four of us in this corner of the Assembly. Of course, those crumbs did not meet any of the desires of those of us who have been sent here on a mandate equal to that of everyone else. Of course, in the Business Committee, it was made sure that there was no representative from this corner until that carve-up had been completed. The result, of course, in my case, is that I have been denied a place on the EU/Brexit Committee because deep-dive scrutiny is not what is required. It is the form rather than the substance of scrutiny that the protocol-implementing parties in the House wish to see. On that Committee or not, elsewhere, I will continue to shine a light on the dark deeds of colonial rule from the EU in this place.

Finally, I raise the considered and irrefutable contribution of Lord Dodds, Lord Morrow and Sammy Wilson in Saturday's 'News Letter', when the spin and the myth from the DUP leadership about the Irish Sea border being gone, Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom being restored and the DUP's seven tests being met was well and truly exploded. The dissembling of the DUP leadership was demolished in that article. I encourage others in the House who share that trio's truth to speak up and not to hide their light under a bushel or be intimidated out of saying what they really think.

Christian Brothers Grammar School, Omagh: MacRory Cup

Mr McAleer: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. I commend you on taking up your position.

First, I congratulate the Christian Brothers Grammar School, Omagh, on its stunning back-to-back victory in the MacRory Cup yesterday against St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon. I commiserate with St Patrick's on the day, but it was a great game of football in an all-Tyrone encounter. This is a significant year for the MacRory Cup as it is its centenary, the 100th year of the MacRory Cup. It is also a significant milestone for Christian Brothers Grammar School, Omagh, because it is 50 years since the school first won the MacRory Cup, in 1974.

I congratulate the players. It takes a lot of commitment, dedication and hard work to reach that level and to balance all the other challenges of their schoolwork and other things

in their lives. I acknowledge the work of the coaches, the teachers and the parents and that of the Armagh county board for having the pitch and facilities in such great condition for yesterday's game. I also commend Ulster Schools GAA for organising this great competition. It caters for 130 schools and involves over 1,800 games in an academic year. It means a lot to the communities and to the feeder clubs. The buzz in the Athletic Grounds in Armagh yesterday was palpable. I also commend Abbey Vocational School on its victory in the McLarnon Cup against Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock, yesterday.

In conclusion, I congratulate Christian Brothers Grammar School, Omagh, and wish it all the very best as it sets out to win back-to-back Hogan Cups.

Mr Speaker: I call Gerry Carroll, who will have two minutes.

Refugee Families: Eviction

Mr Carroll: This morning, in my constituency, I was compelled to visit the home of a refugee family who were facing eviction from their home. I was there because housing campaigners in the Community Action Tenants Union (CATU) — fair play to them — had issued a call to the community to prevent that family, who came here fleeing war and persecution, from being put out on the street.

I am sorry to say that this is not an isolated incident. Like too many others, this family has been served notice by the private firm Mears, which acts under the direction of the racist Tory Government and their cruel hostile environment policy. Evictions are just one of the punitive measures meted out against asylum seekers and refugees. Essentially, we have a situation where families that are finally granted secure status are being told that they have to leave their home. It goes without saying that our party thinks that a private firm should not be allowed to profit from our asylum system. Such firms should certainly not be allowed to evict people out of their homes.

The forced eviction of people who have fled war, poverty and persecution is reprehensible, and this racist Tory Administration have been ruthless and systematic in denying the rights of asylum seekers. While banned from working and living in absolute poverty, asylum seekers are routinely housed in appalling accommodation. Forced eviction would deny them what little rights they already have.

My question today is this: what are this Executive going to do about it? The Executive Office's draft refugee integration strategy claims to want a:

"society where refugees and asylum seekers are valued and feel safe, are integrated into communities".

How can that be possible when refugees are being forced from their homes and forced to move to who knows where, with their children forced to leave school and their lives torn asunder. Human rights organisations and housing campaigners have already written to the Secretary of State calling for a ban on these evictions. This Executive need to support that call as a bare minimum and to ensure that refugees are afforded the opportunity to stay in the communities that they now are a part of. This Executive also need to decide whether they will stand over the Tories' racist hostile environment policy or whether they will resist implementation of it.

Mr Speaker: I ask Mr Carroll to draw his remarks to a close, please.

I ask Members to note this: if Members are asked to draw their remarks to a close and they do not do it, that will be reflected in their being called on future occasions. Therefore, if you do not want to take your seat, you might be remaining in it a lot more.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

Mr Clarke: I beg to move

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for Monday 12 February 2024.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for Monday 12 February 2024.

Statutory Committees: Membership

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 49(3), the membership of the Statutory Committees as detailed in NIA 3/22-27 be approved. — [Mr Clarke.]

Standing Committees: Membership

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 52(3), the membership of the Standing Committees as detailed in NIA 4/22-27 be approved. — [Mr Clarke.]

Standing Order 79(2): Suspension

Mr Clarke: I beg to move

That Standing Order 79(2) be suspended for Monday 12 February 2024.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 79(2) be suspended for Monday 12 February 2024.

Assembly Commission: Appointments

Mr Speaker: The next item in the Order Paper is the motion on appointments to the Assembly Commission. As with similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate.

Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that, in accordance with Standing Order 79(3), the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79, the following shall be appointed to be members of the Assembly Commission:

*The Speaker (ex officio);
Mr Trevor Clarke;
Mr Robbie Butler;
Mrs Sinéad Ennis;
Miss Nuala McAllister; and
Mr Colin McGrath. — [Mr Clarke.]*

Ministerial Statements

Education Infrastructure: Sustainable Investment

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that he wishes to make a statement. I remind the Assembly of the convention that Members wishing to ask a question should be in the Chamber to hear the Minister's statement in its entirety. For obvious reasons, this practice was eased when social distancing was in place in the Chamber, but it now applies again.

Before I call the Minister, I also remind Members that they must be concise in asking their questions. This is not an opportunity for debate, and long introductions will not be allowed. I also remind Ministers to be concise in their answers. I do not want to hear a lot of waffle.

Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): Before I make the statement, I want to associate myself with the remarks by the Member for North Antrim in respect of the principal of Dalriada School, Mr Tom Skelton. Since Mr Skelton's sudden passing, I have heard many tributes to him and learned of the very high esteem in which he was held in the community. I was in Ballymoney on Saturday. I look after Dromore Ladies Hockey Club. We were playing Ballymoney, and they asked for a minute's silence to be held. I took part in that as a mark of respect and in tribute to him within that community. I extend my sympathy to the family on that sudden passing and thank the Member for raising it.

Today, I am setting out an ambitious vision for school facilities across Northern Ireland. I believe that there can be no greater investment in our future than investment in education. Children across Northern Ireland have the right to be educated in schools that are comfortable and safe, of good quality and properly designed and resourced to support their learning. Over the next decade, we need to transform our school buildings so that they are truly fit for the future and can provide the best possible education experience for our young people. However, this will require a significant step change in the level of capital investment and in the pace and scale of delivery. The willingness of the Executive to fund such a programme will be an acid test of their commitment to invest in the future of our most valuable resource.

The facts are incontrovertible. International research is clear that the learning environment can impact positively on teaching approaches, health and well-being and student outcomes. We know that being taught in school buildings that are in poor condition has an adverse effect on attainment, motivation and enthusiasm and, most importantly, restricts the delivery of a modern school curriculum. Our teachers cannot foster the skills that our young people need for the 21st century in crumbling buildings with poor facilities that were designed and built 60, 70 or 80-plus years ago. Our children need schools with specialist facilities to allow access to a modern curriculum that includes digital skills, technology, science and a wide range of practical subjects, from PE and drama to home economics and beyond.

To support our young people to develop a love of sport and exercise and to combat societal issues like childhood obesity, we need not just sports halls but good-quality pitches. For many children, school is their only opportunity to play outside safely. Promoting high-quality play for our youngest learners requires investment in outdoor equipment and facilities.

The recent and rapid growth in the number of children with special educational needs (SEN) requires the largest increase in school capacity for two generations. The number of pupils with statements of special educational needs has increased from 19,000 in 2019 to just over 24,000 pupils currently. That is 5,000 additional children who require placements. To meet that demand, we need to more than double special educational needs places over the coming years. With the support of the Executive, I am committed to delivering on that ambition.

12.45 pm

If we seize the opportunity now, we have the opportunity to transform our school estate. Working together, we have the opportunity to demonstrate to people across Northern Ireland what can be achieved, but, to do that, we must not just tell them but show them through our spending that we are investing in the future of our children.

Our young people are our promise. We must show them that we are committed to delivering a modern, fit-for-purpose education system that truly meets the needs of our society and our pupils in the 21st century. We have inherited a difficult situation. In recent years, Education capital budgets have stood still, while construction costs have spiralled by over 30%. High inflation in construction prices has significantly eroded the Department's spending

power, so that the current year's capital budget for Education has been wholly insufficient to meet even the most inescapable needs.

We have an ageing and dispersed estate of over 1,100 schools with rapidly escalating maintenance needs due to historic underinvestment. The consequences of a 15-year backlog in planned maintenance across the schools estate are now being felt acutely. Many mid-20th-century schools have reached the end of their shelf life and are, quite simply, no longer fit for purpose. Every day, departmental officials receive unprecedented emergency requests to replace boilers, heating and electrical and other vital materials, such as canteen equipment to provide school dinners. Those works are required to simply keep schools open.

Last week, one of my first visits as Minister was to Glenwood Primary School on the Shankill Road. The school does fantastic work in challenging circumstances. However, crumbling wall ties in the ageing buildings have presented an imminent risk of collapse and require emergency works to ensure that the children and teachers are safe. That type of problem is repeated in countless schools across Northern Ireland.

The large and unprecedented growth in the number of children with complex special educational needs has placed an unsustainable pressure on my Department's capital budget and overtaken all previous planning assumptions, yet not a single additional pound of capital funding has been provided to my Department for additional special needs placements. Instead, this year, the education sector faced an 8% reduction in its executive capital funding. Over half the Education capital budget was spent on SEN placements and emergency and statutory works.

The Assembly must be clear.: education cannot continue with current levels of capital funding. We are at risk even in the most basic requirements to keep schools open, keep children safe and provide places for our most vulnerable learners. Substantial additional investment is therefore urgently required, and I will make the case for sustained capital investment in our education infrastructure. I am conscious of the competing public expenditure pressures across government, but what is more important than the future of our children? I want to maximise the bang for the buck of every pound spent. I want to signal a new approach to investment in our schools. I want to end the game of winners and losers, where there are great facilities and opportunities for some but

where the majority make do and mend. Let me be clear about this: that approach is not acceptable to me, and it is going to change.

My officials have submitted funding bids of £528 million to the Department of Finance to meet Education capital needs next year. As an absolute minimum, I will require an additional £100 million of capital above the draft Budget allocation to meet pressures in regard to special educational needs placements. That will provide essential schools for our most vulnerable children. Without it, we will not just stand still but may fall backwards. That will be an important first step. However, additional investment will need to be sustained and, indeed, increased over the next decade in order to build two new special schools, expand the existing special school sector and provide many hundreds of specialist units in mainstream schools.

Good planning and sound investment decisions require certainty and stability around future funding levels. Across my Department's capital programmes, in every constituency and school sector, there is a wide range of much-needed investment projects that urgently need to be delivered. There is not a moment to lose. That is why, to begin the process, I have instructed my officials to lift the pause that was imposed, in the absence of a Minister, on a number of new-build projects for schools in the worst conditions that were announced by my predecessor. That will ensure a pipeline of investment for future years.

I will shortly bring to the Executive proposals for investment in the Strule Shared Education Campus in Omagh. That visionary and unique campus will bring together six schools and over 4,000 children on a cross-community basis on a shared site. It will be a regional and international exemplar of shared education. My officials are finalising work on the full business case, and a potential contractor is in place. However, without ring-fenced additional investment, this innovative project, which will transform education provision for all the children of Omagh, may not be able to proceed. We should recall that the UK Government's £3.3 billion funding package for the Executive includes £150 million of the Fresh Start capital funding that was previously ring-fenced for shared and integrated capital projects. I am clear that, if they are serious about delivering the project, the Executive need to recommit that funding to the education sector as a matter of the utmost urgency.

As I visit schools and meet principals over the coming weeks, I will talk to them about the

types of capital investment that will make a real difference to children's learning. It is not necessarily all about large new buildings. Instead, I want to bring forward a greater range of parallel streams of investment to improve classrooms, outdoor spaces, sports facilities and, above all, curriculum-led projects to support teaching and learning, so that every child feels the benefits of the investment that we make. High-impact and relatively low-cost projects to create effective outdoor learning environments or bespoke well-being spaces can make a lasting improvement to everyday life in a school. I have therefore commissioned my officials to develop, as a matter of priority, a capital investment strategy for education that sets out a compelling vision for a responsive, agile and innovative programme of capital investment that is clearly aligned to wider education and Executive policy.

Capital investment of varying scope and scale will be a key driver of innovation across the education system, capital investment to reshape education provision, support the improvement of the quality of learning outcomes, tackle disadvantage and promote health and well-being. We must remember that schools offer opportunities for new and better facilities that can be used by all local people. That has the most profound benefits in our disadvantaged communities. Investment in the schools estate can embed a wider, place-based approach to improve local outcomes.

I hope to work collaboratively across government to utilise schools to coordinate and integrate local services to support communities. I want our schools to be a central focus of their community and the community to be part of the school. That approach will tackle the cycle of multigenerational disadvantage. The new and ambitious investment strategy for education will make a key contribution to a wider Executive programme of well-targeted capital investment to boost employment, support economic recovery and generate regional growth.

Our education system has reached a critical juncture. This is a moment of decision and a moment of truth. On one path, there is a real danger of our children being left behind in facilities from a previous century in damp, mouldy classrooms; our most vulnerable learners being without the equipment to meet their most basic needs; and demoralised teachers in decrepit, unfit buildings. On the other hand, I offer the vision of an education system in which every child benefits from improved facilities and is educated in a high-quality learning environment by motivated

teachers with the facilities and resources to deliver a modern curriculum.

If we are to meet our children's expectations, we must invest in our school buildings as a key part of the Executive's long-term economic plan. That is not a goal or ambition that I can deliver on my own. That is why I ask Members to support me here and at the Executive table in prioritising investment in the future of our society in order to build an education estate that is worthy of our children, our excellent teachers and our ambitions for a prosperous and dynamic Northern Ireland.

I commend the statement to the House.

Mr McCrossan: I congratulate the Minister on his new post and wish him well with the increased challenges in the Department. I also thank him for his recommitment to Strule, which will come as a relief to the people of Omagh.

I am sure that the Minister is aware that his Department has the worst track record for special educational needs and for delivering projects within a reasonable time frame. That contributes, as, I am sure, he will agree, significantly to the escalation of costs and poor value for public money. Will the Minister tell the Assembly how long it will take to present the strategy report to the House and how he plans to get the additional resources that he proposes to reduce the time it takes to get capital build programmes delivered?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for his kind remarks on my position as Education Minister. I reassure him that everything I am doing at the Department is to act with the required urgency. That is why I have commissioned the capital investment strategy now. In my statement, I outlined the areas that the strategy needs to address. Officials clearly understand the urgency with which I want to take this forward.

The Member is right to highlight the failure to deliver projects, the budget that is required and the underfunding of the education system. That is why I have put forward a very ambitious capital bid to the Department of Finance, which will be for the wider Executive to consider in agreeing their future Budget. I am pleased that the Member agrees with me on that. I look forward to continued support from him as we make the case for investing in our education system.

Mr Mathison: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the fact that he has come to the Chamber so quickly and so early

with his plans. I look forward to working with him to ensure that we deliver on the huge capital challenges and the challenges across the board in education.

I welcome the particular reference to SEN and the need for investment in our SEN transformation programme and SEN places. Will the Minister provide more detail on how he will ensure that any additional capital allocation received for SEN is delivered to ensure that the required places in both mainstream and special settings are in place for September 2024 for our SEN children?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for the question and wish him well in his role as Chairman of the Education Committee. I look forward to working with him in that capacity. I know that it will be constructive, but I am sure that it will also be challenging. I would not expect anything less from the Chairman of the Committee.

The Member rightly highlights special educational needs. That is where, in this financial year, the Department's focus has been in addressing the urgency to support placements in mainstream schools but also in special schools, of which we have 39 in Northern Ireland, in order to accommodate the people who need them. There is a focus on that. In my statement, I highlighted the fact that, in the next financial year, the absolute minimum that I need for special educational need capital spend will be in the region of £100 million. In addition to all of that, I need to be able to take forward major capital projects, deal with the school enhancement programme and ICT; the list goes on. Special educational needs is a priority for the Department, however, and a priority for me as Minister to take forward as a matter of urgency so that we can meet the needs that have been flagged to me. As we approach 1 September, it is critical that we provide support for every child to get the placement that they need.

Mr Delargy: I welcome the Minister to his role and look forward to working closely with him. I was disappointed, however, that he did not mention Irish-medium education in his statement. There are three Gaelscoileanna [*Translation: Irish-medium schools*] in my constituency where children are being taught in Portakabins each day. That is the case for 60% of Irish-medium education across the North.

I ask the Minister, first, will he come to my constituency and visit some of those Gaelscoileanna, as his predecessor did?

Secondly, what will he do to ensure that Irish-medium education is prioritised?

1.00 pm

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for his question. I will just push back slightly on the Member, as I did not mention the controlled sector or the Catholic maintained sector either. I highlighted special educational needs. My statement refers to the entirety of our education system. Everybody within that, as I have already said on the record, will be treated fairly and equitably, irrespective of which sector they come from, in the education system. I have been inundated with requests to visit schools, but if the Member wishes to invite me to visit schools in his constituency, I will be more than happy, as I put together a schools visit programme, to facilitate the Member in his area.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for a frank and honest assessment in his statement. Our education estate is quite literally creaking at the seams, with many schools falling into dire need in my constituency. I want to highlight, in particular, Portadown College. There are broken single-glazed windows, cracked walls and poor disability access. Surely that is not acceptable in today's society. Will the Minister work with me and the senior leadership team and governors of Portadown College to ensure that they can continue on their journey to much-needed, much-deserved, modern, 21st-century facilities?

Mr Givan: I will just take my place, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for that question and commend him for the way in which he has championed the education sector in his constituency of Upper Bann. On my first day in post, he engaged with me in respect of Portadown College and highlighted the need for investment in it. I appreciate that other Members undoubtedly will have a particular interest in their area and will raise that, but, in the context of the statement, the Member is right to identify the issue. I have already outlined that I intend to bring proposals to the Executive to seek significant additional capital for the next financial year and future years. That is why, in this context, it is important that we ensure a flow of projects into the early stages of planning and design.

I have asked my officials to take steps to commence the procurement of integrated consultant teams for seven of the highest-ranked new-build projects that were announced by my predecessor, Michelle McIlveen. Those projects had been paused due to the extremely

difficult budget, but they will now progress in that planning stage. The seven projects are: Carrickfergus Academy; Loreto College, Coleraine; Dromore High School; Edmund Rice College, Newtownabbey; Portadown College; Mercy College Belfast; and Malone Integrated College, Belfast.

Ms Dillon: I welcome the Minister's statement. I particularly welcome the fact that he will lift that pause, as a number of schools in my area have been paused that are already in contract.

In relation to special educational needs, I do not need to say it, as he has already outlined the challenges that we have, but I ask the Minister to consider coming to Sperrinview Special School. It is an excellent school that provides excellent services for the children who can get into it, but, at this time, the school cannot accommodate all the children who want to go there. I would appreciate an update from him on his plans around Sperrinview.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for the question. I have worked with the Member constructively before in different capacities, and I look forward to doing so again. The Member highlights the issue in respect of Sperrinview. Obviously, I have addressed the wider context of the need to invest in our special schools but also in our mainstream schools and the need to make sure that we have placements there. I am more than happy to engage with the Member in respect of her constituency.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement and congratulate him on his appointment. In my constituency of North Down alone, quite a number of schools, including Crawfordsburn Primary School, Priory Integrated College, Holywood Primary School and Bangor Central Integrated Primary School, have all had plans in place for many years for new builds and are in real need of investment. Will the Minister assure the House that he will make every effort to ensure that those schools will not be forgotten?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for the question and for very quickly inviting me to Crawfordsburn Primary School. The planning is under way for that visit to take place. He highlighted a number of other schools. That is why I am making the case for capital investment: Members will all have a wide range of schools. From 2012, of the 102 schools identified for major capital projects, only 35 have been completed. So, over 70 schools have been announced for major capital projects, and we are still waiting for construction

to commence. They are at various stages in the planning process that they must go through before they can get to the point of construction.

That is why the capital bid that I am making is ambitious. It is a capital project that will extend way beyond the next 10 years in its delivery, but it is important that we have the pipeline of potential schools ready so that, should capital become available, construction can commence. That is why I am unpausing the process for the seven schools that I have identified to allow them to continue to get to the point where they are shovel ready, subject to the appropriate finance being available.

Ms Nicholl: Thank you to the Minister for his statement. I congratulate him on his appointment and welcome the fact that his first visit was to Rathmore Grammar School in my constituency. I also welcome the mention of Malone Integrated College. Will the Minister provide an update on the proposed scale of capital investment that will be required in our nursery estate to deliver the standardisation of the preschool education programme?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for her best wishes. I look forward to working with her on the Education Committee, if I am right about her appointment to that.

Obviously, the investment in our capital estate includes post-primary, primary and nursery provision. I highlighted that we have 1,100 schools across the estate in Northern Ireland. They all need investment, some more than others, and that is why the capital investment strategy that I have commissioned will look at the needs right across our estate. That will be important as we look to the childcare strategy, which we will get to later today in the Assembly's business. If everybody moves towards having twenty-two and a half hours of provision, and we level up in that respect, we need to ensure that the capacity exists to deliver on that.

The Member joins the dots in respect of how important it is to have the appropriate capital invested in our estate in order to deliver other objectives, including a childcare strategy, that we, as an Executive, will require.

Mr Baker: I wish the Minister all the best in his new role, and welcome his recognition of the importance of the education of children and young people with special educational needs. In meeting those needs, has an analysis been carried out as to where any new special schools are likely to be needed?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for his best wishes. I mentioned in the statement the need to take forward two new special schools, but when it comes to providing additional capacity in the 39 schools that are there, that is an ongoing piece of work as to what is necessary. Also, for those who require special provision in mainstream establishments, it is critical that schools get the support that they need in order to provide children with special needs access to mainstream education. That is all part of the work that I will be taking forward in the Department.

Mr Bradley: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment and look forward to working with him over the course of the mandate. I also thank him for his statement, especially the part about the removal of Loreto College from the pause list, which is welcome news for my constituency. However, I would like to ask about the future schools merger in Coleraine between North Coast Integrated College, Coleraine College and Dunluce School. The last correspondence that I received from a Minister, quite some time ago, stated that the new school would be on-site by September 2026.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for his question. I undertake to write to him to provide the necessary detail to give him a fulsome answer.

Mr Butler: I congratulate my neighbour and Lagan Valley colleague on attaining the role of Minister of Education. It is one of the most important Ministries to hold. I thank him for his verbal commitment today to special education, and to special schools in particular. Will he put visits to Fleming Fulton School and Harberton Special School in his diary?

I turn to the subject of the statement: sustainable investment in education infrastructure. The most important infrastructure that we have in our schools is our pupils, followed by our teachers and support staff. Will the Minister take the opportunity to update us on the pay negotiations for classroom assistants and drivers, given that, if children do not have support in schools, it will not matter how much we put into the quality of the buildings?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member — my friend — for his best wishes in taking on the role. I will certainly avail myself of his expertise in special needs in particular, and I look forward to working with him.

The Member rightly raises the issue of ensuring that the right infrastructure is in place to allow our teachers and support staff the right environment in which to be able to deliver their work. That hit close to home when I visited Glenwood Primary School on the Shankill Road last week. I was appalled at the conditions in which members of the teaching profession and classroom assistants there are having to deliver education. The conditions in which they have to operate are beyond those in the Third World, yet they are delivering excellent education. They need much more support, however. Particularly for communities that come from such disadvantage, there has to be a real focus on supporting them to be able to deliver.

The Member asked me about the pay and conditions issue. I have already spoken publicly about the need to resolve that. I can confirm that I will be meeting the trade union representatives tomorrow morning in Lisburn.

Mr McGuigan: I also congratulate the Minister and wish him good luck throughout his term of appointment. I welcome his commitment to having excellent facilities for children.

He mentioned the large number of schools with infrastructure projects in the pipeline. One of those is Mary Queen of Peace Primary School in Glenravel. A couple of generations of primary-school children have already passed through it without there being a new build. Can the Minister give a commitment today to parents and children in Glenravel that they will soon see development at Mary Queen of Peace? I invite him to the area to meet the board of governors and pupils.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for his kind remarks. I am more than happy to engage with him on constituency matters. I will write to the Member about the school that he highlighted.

There are schools on the list to be delivered. I referred to Glenwood on the Shankill as being one of them. Subject to finance being made available, it is at a point at which we could commence construction on-site within the next financial year. The seven schools that I have identified are at a much earlier stage in the process. That allows them to move into the stream of work. A number of years down the road, and, again, subject to finance, they will be at the point of being able to move on-site. There are other schools, should the Executive provide me with the finance that is needed, on which work can be commenced within the next financial year. I do not know the details of the school that the Member mentioned, but I will provide him with a written update.

Ms Eastwood: I also congratulate my constituency colleague and friend — hopefully, we are still friends — Paul Givan on his elevation to the post of Education Minister.

I desperately want to know whether the abandoned former Dromore Central Primary School site forms part of his vision, given that that school has long been earmarked for use for special educational needs.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for her best wishes. I am sure that we will continue to be friends as she holds my feet to the fire. We will continue to have not just a professional relationship but that friendship, and I wish her well in her role.

She rightly raises the issue of Dromore Central Primary School, which is a derelict site. I have asked for an update on all the derelict facilities across the education estate. Dromore is one example, but there are others, not just in Lagan Valley but in every Member's constituency, that one could point to as having facilities that are derelict and no longer in use. What purpose are they therefore serving?

That may no longer be in the education sphere, but, for Dromore Central Primary School, the Member highlighted what the Education Authority's (EA) view is on special needs provision. When it comes to how to meet the needs around special educational needs in the future, I will want to look at whether there is a role that we can advance in respect of Dromore.

1.15 pm

Mr Kingston: I congratulate Paul Givan on his appointment as Education Minister. I know that he will be hard-working and enthusiastic in the role. I particularly welcome the mention of his visit to Glenwood Primary School on the Shankill Road last week. My party colleagues and I have been lobbying for many years to bring forward the major capital investment that is needed there. If funding for such major works is made available, what criteria will be used to prioritise those major capital investments?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for his best wishes and his question. Obviously, when it comes to taking forward projects and entering that construction phase, it is all on the basis of need. That is ultimately the criterion that we will use to advance projects.

The Glenwood project was announced in 2012, I think, maybe by someone opposite who was Minister at the time. I walked around the school, and I saw single pane windows, condensation on every window, mouldy walls and crumbling plaster; indeed, I saw plaster that had been put over plaster and was falling down. I saw evidence of all that. Water was leaking through the roof into two buckets in a corridor. It is wholly inadequate and grossly unfair for the children of that community and the teaching profession to have to operate in that environment. The need for a new build was recognised over 10 years ago, and yet we have still not been able to enter the construction phase. Subject to finance being made available, we are at the point in that scheme at which it could be taken forward in the next financial year.

The challenge for me — this is why I am making the statement — is to outline the Department of Education's significant capital requirements. I can take forward schemes, such as the one in Glenwood and other schools that Members raised, only if I receive suitable resources to do so. I am up for doing that. I say this to my colleagues in the Chamber and in the Executive: give me the problem of being able to deal with hundreds of millions of pounds in addition to what we have been able to handle before, and I will deal with that challenge, but do not give me an allocation that fails to recognise the need that exists in the education estate. That will be a dereliction of our responsibility to the next generation. They are the future, and I am committed to delivering for them.

Ms Hunter: I, too, congratulate the Minister on his new position and thank him for his statement, specifically the emphasis on special educational needs and the update on Loreto College Coleraine.

In your statement, Minister, you touched on the fact that our young people are our promise and we must meet their most basic needs: I agree with that. I am mindful that one in 10 children in Northern Ireland experiences food poverty. Has your Department considered the huge impact that hunger can have on learning, and what will it do to ensure that every child has an equal right to and support in achieving academic success?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for her best wishes and her question. I have already been discussing in my Department the issue of how to support people who need that additional support. I have been asking questions about how we can do that and about the best way that

we can do that to make sure that it is effective. A report will be provided to me on that issue and how we can take it forward, as well as recognising the financial constraints in the Executive around how we can do that. The Member is right to raise that issue. I am already considering it, and I have commissioned reports that will be provided to me in respect of that matter.

Ms Hargey: Good luck in the next couple of years. I will follow on from some of the other points and from what was in the statement about the increase in the number of those being assessed for special educational needs from 19,000 to 24,000. We know that that trajectory is likely to climb over the foreseeable future. I am keen to get more analysis on special educational needs and what the provision that is needed looks like.

I am also keen to understand how you will work across Departments and with councils and others on the local development plans that are being delivered. What will the school estate and the investment programme that runs alongside it look like in the next 10 and 20 years?

On the Irish-medium sector, I would like an update on Scoil an Droichid in South Belfast. We know that, at the moment, special educational needs have a disproportionate impact in Irish-medium education, and I know that the proposed new build for Scoil an Droichid on the Ormeau Road will provide additional SEN units. Again, I am keen to get an update on that.

On your approach to poverty and deprivation, I am keen on the work done between the Shankill and Market communities in Belfast and Queen's University. I call on you to visit those projects as well.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for her comments. She raises a number of issues, and I will take the last one first. I will give her a detailed response on that by way of a written reply.

Being better sighted by working with other Departments to identify children who emerge with special educational needs is important. Last year, there seemed to be a lack of awareness of what would be required. I have already been asking the question: how did that arise? Surely, there would have been a way to identify children who need that support within the education system and outside it. Health workers will also have been aware of children who may require that support. Therefore, I am asking why what happened last year was the

case. Rather than us being reactive around such issues, it is about being proactive and identifying at an early stage the need that exists, and we then need to plan how we will meet that. At the moment, we are unable to meet the need that is there. We need to get to the point where we can meet the need but then also get on the front foot so that we are much more prepared. That is why part of the capital bid around special education is to make sure that we can create the necessary capacity to do that.

In respect of what opportunities there are, particularly, for example, with local government, the Member is right. We can all point to schemes in our constituencies where there is a partnership arrangement between the Education Authority and local government through shared facilities. I have them in my constituency, and I am sure that others will be able to highlight similar schemes. Therefore, as part of the planning process and area planning, there is an opportunity, which I certainly want the Department of Education to engage in, to ask, "Is this a shared facility that can be used not just by Education but by other Departments?". Obviously, we need to make sure that a framework exists to do that. It may be that, in developing schemes, we can also find a way to incentivise that kind of partnership, because it makes better sense to utilise the collective resources that are available for the wider community.

Ms Brownlee: I thank the Minister for his statement and for his proactive vision. I welcome and am delighted that we will now see progress on the much-needed Carrickfergus Academy new build, which was locked out for some time. Will the Minister detail when he believes that major capital build will progress and give a projected outline for delivery?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for her remarks and for rightly championing her constituency of East Antrim and the need for that school to progress. I will write to each of those schools later this afternoon about the next phase of the project. That is to allow the integrated consultancy team to be put in place, which then can take forward the various processes that are necessary to get a school to the stage at which, subject to finance, we can enter into contracts and construction can commence. It will take a number of years before we can get to that stage, but it is important for me that they are available and that they come online so that, when I make the case for the necessary capital budget, if it is delivered, we are able to be shovel-ready for those projects. That is the basis on which I will proceed for those schools.

Mr Speaker: We have 10 or 11 Members who want to ask questions in the next 10 minutes, so you will need to be succinct.

Ms Egan: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I congratulate him on taking up the role of Minister of Education.

Teachers in my constituency of North Down and across Northern Ireland do an absolutely fantastic job of educating children and young people and shaping their futures. As referenced in the statement, however, all too often, they do so in buildings that are unfit for use, inadequate, damp and crumbling and even unsafe.

Mr Speaker: Can we have a question, please, Ms Egan?

Ms Egan: How many schools are in need of emergency maintenance? Will the plans that the Minister laid out in his statement address the backlog?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for her question. That is exactly why I am making the case for an increased capital budget. The Department has been focused almost entirely on urgent repairs and the special educational needs provision that needs to exist, and, therefore, the backlog in routine maintenance has continued to increase and increase to the point that so many schools are in a bad state of repair and only emergency repairs for health and safety reasons can be carried out. Hence, there is the need to support my capital bid to the Department of Finance. I welcome the Member's support for that. She highlights the maintenance issues that need to be addressed. I can address those only when I get support from the wider Executive to give me the budget that allows me to do it.

Mr McAleer: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. In March 2022, your predecessor, Minister McIlveen, announced a £14 million investment in Dean Maguirc College in Carrickmore. That is one of the 28 schools that are now paused, and, unfortunately, it is not among the seven that you listed today. What are the next steps for those schools, and is there any indicative timeline for moving forward with the investment?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for raising that issue. At present, the first tranche of seven projects will be sufficient to begin the flow of projects into early planning. Should I obtain additional funding for next year, I will review the

position of the other projects that were announced in 2022. I am aware that Dean Maguirc College in Carrickmore scored well on the prioritised list of the schools that were announced in 2022. However, due to ongoing discussions on the agreement of a future approved enrolment for the school, it was agreed with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) that the project would not progress to procurement until those matters were resolved.

Mr Irwin: I wish you well in your new post, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Minister for his statement and wish him well in his new role.

Will the Minister commit to intensifying efforts on the normalisation process for Markethill High School, given its consistently high enrolments and the absolute importance of a new build to address the obvious issues that are associated with the school's being unfit for purpose? The school was built in 1959 for 300 pupils and currently has 500 pupils.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for the question. The Member raises an issue that needs to be addressed with regard to that normalisation process, where schools have an official enrolment figure but many often operate at a much higher level. Some may be operating at a lower level. Typically, those capital development schemes are based on the official enrolment level. There has been work to normalise the figures across various schools. My officials are finalising that, with recommendations to come to me so that I can complete it.

The Member raises the issue in respect of Markethill High School. I know that it is a particular interest of the deputy First Minister, as a former pupil of the school. I know that she will support me, as, I have no doubt, will colleagues around the Executive table, to get the capital resources into the Department that will allow me to make progress on a lot of the schools estate. When I know what capital I can deal with, I will, of course, be able to consider the need that exists in other schools across the estate.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the Minister. I heard a number of Members talk about him as a friend: I am just thinking that my question might challenge that a wee bit. A number of schools are earmarked for closure. Will the Minister review those schools now that he has come into office?

1.30 pm

Mr Givan: The Member is aware — indeed all Members are aware — of the process that we have to go through in considering development proposals, including for school closures. The approach that needs to be taken is clearly defined. Departmental officials will bring to me, in due course and at the appropriate time, any such proposals.

Mr Gildernew: The Minister mentioned the capital works programme. I draw his attention to St Macartan's Primary School in Clogher in my constituency, which has a fully passed case for a new hall. Currently, students cannot all sit down together for a meal, and there are no activities. Support staff are working in unsafe conditions, and teachers —

Mr Speaker: I think we have the question, Mr Gildernew.

Mr Gildernew: — are eating off their laps. Will the Minister work with me to ensure that that build is brought over the line?

Mr Givan: I am happy to work with the Member who raises the issue. I said in my statement that we need to have a curriculum-led capital development project so that, where schools do not have a sports hall or need provision to deliver aspects of the curriculum, we can find a way to make provision for that. I have made a capital bid to the Department of Finance to enable me to do that.

Mr Clarke: I join others on the list of the Minister's new-found friends. I wish him well in his new role. Lots of Members' questions have been on new builds and there has been much focus on them. I was in Greystone Primary School in my constituency on Friday. It is a 1970s school with the windows falling out.

Mr Speaker: Your question, Mr Clarke?

Mr Clarke: How will the Minister prioritise those very dilapidated buildings and bring them up to standard?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for his question. In the statement, I indicated that there are schools that get brand-new facilities and can deliver the educational curriculum in world-class facilities, but there are others that have to make do and mend. That is not acceptable, and it needs to change. That is why I made the statement and am putting forward a capital bid of £528 million to the Department of Finance. That is hundreds of millions of pounds more

than what the Department of Education has ever received, but it is absolutely necessary if we are to deliver the vision that we have for the next generation.

Mr Durkan: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. We are talking about a lot of projects of different scales, all huge and all important. The Minister rightly mentioned not just the education of our children but their health. Will the Minister prioritise projects that ensure that our schools are warm, dry and safe for our young people?

Mr Givan: The Department has now had to put its resource into those most basic needs that the Member for Foyle raises. We need to move beyond the point of putting sticking plasters over sticking plasters when it comes to capital spend. I trust that Members will continue to support me in securing the necessary resources from the Department of Finance.

Ms Ferguson: I congratulate the Minister on his new position. I very much welcome that the pause has been lifted. However, I am disappointed that only seven schools have been put forward with regard to an integrated consultancy team. Two schools in my constituency, Lumen Christi College and St Brigid's College, are on the capital list, so I am sure that they will be very disappointed today. I ask the Minister to write to both schools to update them as to the exact process of prioritisation of those seven schools and, as others have requested, to inform them of the next steps.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for her remarks. Obviously, as the pause is lifted, the seven projects announced today are on the basis of identified need and the Department's prioritisation. I made the point earlier that, of 102 schools announced since 2012, only 35 have been completed. There are 70 schools in the same position as the two mentioned by the Member. Then, there is the totality of the capital schemes that we need to address, as I outlined in my statement. It is hugely challenging to deliver finance for what we want to deliver, but I am happy to write to the Member in respect of the specific schools that she has raised.

Mr Brett: I am sure that the Minister will agree with me, given the inclusion of Dromore High School on his list today, that all politics is local. Turning to North Belfast, Seaview Primary School and Newtownabbey Community High School passed through the ICT process a number of years ago. The pupils, staff and parents deserve to have fit-for-purpose

facilities. Will the Minister ensure that his new approach can enable those schemes to be delivered?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for his comments. He highlights two schools in his constituency that are at a much more advanced state of readiness. In the event of capital being made available, further progress can be made to take those schemes forward. He is right, and I know that the Speaker campaigned for Dromore High School for a long time. A new build is very much needed, and today's announcement allows an ICT team to be put in place to continue the progress of planning towards it. I have outlined the capital pressures, and we need to bear that in mind when it comes to expectations, but I have outlined the context in which those decisions have been taken and the capital needs that exist.

Ms Brogan: I add my congratulations to the Minister on his new role and wish him all the best in the time ahead. I welcome the Minister's commitment to the Strule shared education campus in Omagh and his intention to bring forward investment proposals. Can he offer some kind of timeline for when he plans to bring forward those proposals?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for her remarks and her question. In my statement, I outlined my views on Strule and the opportunity in respect of it. Moneys that were ring-fenced for Fresh Start — £150 million towards shared and integrated education — are no longer ring-fenced. The £3.3 billion that the UK Government announced rolled in the moneys that were part of Fresh Start. That is no longer ring-fenced, and I need to make the case — I will do so urgently to the Executive — that funding needs to be approved to allow a full business case that will provide us with the costs and benefits associated with it. That process will be carried out to allow a decision to be taken to go into contractual arrangements. We have a contractor in place, and I will be making the case to the Executive that what was previously ring-fenced for shared and integrated education needs to be reinstated as a matter of urgency for my Department. This impacts not just on Strule but on other shared and integrated education programmes that had been part of the original £500 million that had been announced by the NIO.

Mr T Buchanan: I welcome the Minister's statement and wish him well in his new post. He mentioned the Strule shared education campus. Over the past number of years, that project has been fraught with numerous difficulties, not

least those of a financial nature due to the funding uncertainty. In light of that, and of the business case being finalised, can he give any guidance to the House that the project is good value for money?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that question. On the value for money point, the full business case is being prepared, and that will evaluate all the benefits and costs of the programme in full. This project has been in planning for over 15 years, and those schools have been waiting for new accommodation throughout that time. The five schools in Omagh all have serious and significant accommodation deficiencies, and the need for investment in new facilities has been clearly established by my Department's professional advisers and across two outline business cases. Condition surveys of all five schools undertaken in June 2023 indicate that the value of backlog maintenance alone in the schools is now around £12 million. If Strule does not proceed and funding is not ring-fenced for that important programme, it will be many years before any of the schools will receive capital investment. They would be back to the beginning in respect of planning for any new accommodation. As an Executive, we will wish to honour previous commitments to those schools and to the wider Omagh community.

Mr Brooks: My thanks to the Minister for his statement. My constituency colleague Gavin Robinson MP has been engaging with him already on two SEN schools in my constituency, Mitchell House School and Greenwood House Assessment Centre. Will the Minister agree to joining us in a visit those schools to see the critical need for the upgrades that they are awaiting and to see why the investment that he is, rightly, calling for is so desperately needed for some of our most vulnerable pupils?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that question. Yes, I am more than happy to engage with him and the Member of Parliament for East Belfast around the need for this additional funding because, in this wider context, both schools provide for special educational needs. That is a priority for capital spend, but significant investment is required immediately, and that needs to be sustained into the future. That is for not only planned maintenance but digital infrastructure, specialist curriculum facilities, pitches, outdoor play spaces and everyday equipment for teaching and learning, and to provide those SEN placements.

Mr McGrath: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment and wish him well as the Minister

of Education and youth services. On Friday, I visited a school in my constituency, Knockevin Special School. It has to operate across three separate sites because it has outgrown its accommodation. Will the Minister agree that such sites should be prioritised, given that they are operating across multiple sites? Given that the Down High School site is about to become available, will he agree that that might be a good location for a new school?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for his comments. He highlights the issue that I have been engaging with already, which is that, in delivering the curriculum, some pupils who do not have a sports hall for PE then have to be bussed to somewhere that can provide that and meets the needs of the curriculum. That eats up valuable time during the education day, and it also requires transport to be provided. None of that is conducive to delivering the kind of curriculum that they need. Where schools have multiple sites, that is a challenge, and that is why I am making the bid for the capital funding for our Department. We can then try to drive forward a curriculum-led development scheme.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister address the penny-wise/pound-foolish approach of providing a new school and then refusing, over successive decades, to attend to basic maintenance? I reference the school that I know best, Moorfields Primary School. It was a new school 15 years ago, fantastic. However, all basic maintenance has since been denied until we have reached the point where, eventually, it will cost far more to put in place the repairs than if they had been dealt with as they arose.

Mr Givan: I agree entirely with the Member for North Antrim on the point that he is making. It is indicative of the dire state that we have got ourselves into that we are unable to do this kind of planned maintenance because we literally are trying to keep schools open. Emergency repairs are now what is necessary as is providing the placements for special educational needs. On the school that the Member highlights, his point is valid, but the contrast of that school with Glenwood Primary School on the Shankill Road is like night and day when considering the fabric of the buildings and the environment in which we are trying to teach children.

I want to be able to address a planned maintenance scheme, a school enhancement programme and curriculum-led capital development as well as major capital projects and ICT upgrades. I want to be able to take

forward all the issues that I have mentioned. The challenge to everybody in this House and to my Executive colleagues is to provide the resources that are necessary to meet the needs of our children and young people.

Mr Carroll: Gaelscoil an Lonnain, an excellent Gaelscoil in my constituency, is in a building that is totally unfit for purpose and has a high proportion of SEN pupils. Coláiste Feirste is oversubscribed by several hundred pupils. What assurances can the Minister give all Gaelscoileanna that he and his Department will treat them fairly when it comes to getting access to the required capital and resource funding? Gaelscoileanna have been left out of the past three capital build announcements by previous Ministers.

Mr Givan: I made reference to this point earlier in reply to a Member for Foyle. Every school will be treated fairly and equitably for the time in which I am Minister of Education. That is the approach that I will take. The provision that is required will be based on need. The Member can be assured on the approach that I will be taking on this issue.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the Minister's statement. All Members who were here for the statement were called. Two Members who were here late were called late. You might not receive that latitude in future, but, given that we are just starting again, you have been given a little latitude.

1.45 pm

Potholes: Additional Investment

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Infrastructure that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that they need to be in the Chamber to hear the whole of the Minister's statement if they wish to be called to ask a question and must be concise in asking their question.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure): I understand that some Members may not have received the statement in due time. I apologise to the Speaker and the House for that error. In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement regarding the provision of additional funding to address potholes.

Having previously served as the Minister for Infrastructure, I am very aware of the long-term

underfunding from which our road network has suffered due to over a decade of Tory cuts and austerity. As a result, my Department has been operating in a very difficult financial position that has been compounded by the recent two-year collapse of the Assembly. That has had a significant impact on the ability to deliver essential maintenance functions.

Whilst my officials and maintenance crews have worked very hard to maintain the road network, they have, nonetheless, been forced to concentrate only on the highest-priority repairs. To be clear, that is not a position that any of us want to be in and does not represent good maintenance practice. As a result, we have all seen continued deterioration in the infrastructure, with large numbers of potholes and other defects developing across the road network, especially after periods of particularly cold or wet weather. However, despite that challenging position, on average, approximately 7,000 road service defects are fixed each month.

As a driver and a constituency MLA, I am well aware of the frustrations and, at times, inconvenience that this has caused people and communities who rely on the road network to do business, go to work and school and connect to one another. I cannot overstate the value of our road network to our people, our communities and our economic well-being. Therefore, today, I am taking action to begin to address the issue.

Today, I am announcing the immediate investment of an additional £1 million in road maintenance to address the growing backlog of pothole repairs. That much-needed funding will be used between now and the end of the financial year to target areas of highest priority, with small resurfacing schemes designed to repair areas that have suffered the most and where localised repairs are less effective. However, that is only the beginning of much-needed investment in our road infrastructure, and my Executive colleagues and I will continue to work together to press the British Government for more funding to address the issues. There has been a growing backlog of work needed to bring our roads to an acceptable standard, and there is a pressing need to address that. That is something that I will be closely focusing on in the coming months.

This announcement is a positive one and reflects my commitment to do all that I can to repair our roads. It also reinforces the importance of having locally elected Ministers in place to make decisions such as this.

In closing, I reiterate my commitment to addressing the historical underinvestment in the road network caused by over a decade of Tory cuts and austerity, and the £1 million of funding demonstrates that. This is the first step in what I see as the priority of improving the daily lives of people, communities and businesses by providing to our citizens the services that they expect and deserve.

Mr Durkan: Comhghairdeas leis an Aire as a phost nua, agus guim ádh mór air fosta. *[Translation: I congratulate the Minister on his new job and wish him good luck as well.]* I welcome the statement and any additional investment in our crumbling network. A constituent remarked to me just last week that we used to drive on the left of the road, and now we drive on what's left of the road. Can the Minister estimate how many holes will be filled by the £1 million? Does he agree that the cumulative negative impact of not having an Executive has been particularly harsh on our roads, given the perennial reliance of his Department on monitoring rounds to boost the road maintenance budget?

Mr O'Dowd: There obviously has been an impact on road maintenance programmes, because, as the Member will be aware from his time in the Department for Regional Development (DRD) — I think it was DRD then —

Mr Durkan: The Department of the Environment (DOE).

Mr O'Dowd: DOE, then: it has changed that many times. This Department relies on monitoring rounds to uplift its maintenance budget. I hope that we are now in a position to start that programme of work, and I can assure everyone in the House that I will look to those monitoring rounds to get further investment in our road maintenance programme.

On the number of schemes, I emphasise to Members that it is not a case of our coming along with a wheelbarrow of tarmac or asphalt and tipping it into a hole; they will be resurfacing schemes in many areas. I estimate that between 40 and 50 schemes will be carried out. It is only a small start, but it is a start, and, as I said, I will continue to look for further finance to carry out the work.

Mrs Erskine: I congratulate the Minister, who has been put in the infrastructure role, and, as the Committee's newly appointed Chairperson, I look forward to working with him. The Committee has not yet formally conducted its

first meeting. I am sure, however, that potholes will be one of our priorities going forward and that there will be a lot of discussion about them.

I have no doubt that the constituencies of Members across the House are full of pothole issues. What is the extent of the growing backlog to which the Minister has referred? How much resource does the Department consider it needs to achieve and deliver good maintenance practices for the road network?

Mr O'Dowd: The backlog is growing every day. Every time that there is a downfall of rain or a heavy frost, the road maintenance backlog for potholes grows. We are currently operating on a limited budget. We have around £21 million in this financial year for fixing potholes and surfaces. Ideally, we would like to operate with three times that, but we do not have it. I listened to the Minister of Education on the competing priorities that we have around our Executive table. I have to work as part of the collective around that table, but I can assure the Member that I will do everything in my power to secure in-year monitoring funds and to stabilise the Department for Infrastructure's budget so that we can plan our road maintenance for the long term.

I end by congratulating the Member on becoming the Chair of the Committee. I look forward to working with her and her colleagues.

Mr Boylan: Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. I wish you well in your new role, Mr Speaker, and I welcome the Minister back to the Department.

Minister, no doubt, many elected reps will be inundated with phone calls after the announcement today, but can you give a clear time frame for how soon staff will be out fixing the potholes and pieces of road? I am sure that a lot of questions will be asked about today's announcement.

Mr O'Dowd: When I came into the Department and spoke to my officials, I was keen to see whether we could secure additional finance to address issues with potholes and road surfaces. We are up against a tight timescale, as it is about six weeks until the end of the financial year. The money has to be spent in that time frame, so we have to be able to mobilise the workforce to do that and be assured that we can spend the money. At this stage, my officials have told me that we can handle around £1 million's worth of work. I continue to engage with my officials to see whether, if other finance becomes available, we

can mobilise more of the workforce to carry out further schemes in different areas. I have no doubt that your phone will be busy today.

Mr McReynolds: I thank the Minister for his statement. I congratulate him on his new role, and I look forward to working with him over the mandate.

Some of the most vulnerable road users are pedestrians and cyclists, as is highlighted in the active travel strategy. Can you confirm how the investment will prioritise those vulnerable road users?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes. It is important that we improve the road network for all its users. You make a good point about cyclists. Cyclists are particularly vulnerable to potholes along our roads. I want to see our road network improved for motorists, cyclists and pedestrians, particularly in rural areas where pedestrians have to use the road instead of the footpath. I am minded of all those issues when I make such decisions.

Mr McAleer: I wish the Minister well in his appointment. I also wish the new Chair of the Committee for Infrastructure well in that position. No doubt, like me, she dodges a lot of potholes when making her way to the House from the west.

As an MLA who, like many, represents a dispersed rural constituency, I know that potholes and the state of our rural roads are serious issues. Does the Minister's statement today highlight the need for additional investment in our rural roads network? Now that the Assembly is going again, will the Minister be able to make better use of monitoring rounds to get additional investment to address the crumbling state of our roads?

Mr O'Dowd: There is a particular argument in relation to rural roads. My predecessor, Chris Hazzard, brought forward a scheme that targeted rural roads in particular for resurfacing and improvement, and I hope to do something similar. It will take time to establish what finances are available for the time ahead and how we can best use monitoring rounds, but I am keen to invest in our rural road network.

Mr Stewart: As Deputy Chair of the Infrastructure Committee, I formally congratulate the Minister on his new role and wish him all the best.

I welcome the Minister's statement. He is very aware of the staggering numbers: there were

more than 110,000 potholes in Northern Ireland last year — there was an increase of 34% in my constituency of East Antrim — and the average time taken for repair is four to six weeks. Can the Minister explain how the £1 million will be divvied up? Can East Antrim have all of it, please?

Mr O'Dowd: I have already asked that question for Upper Bann, and I was turned down.

It will probably be divvied up so that each division receives a similar amount of this tranche of funding. It is worth noting that, despite the severe financial restrictions that my Department, like other Departments, is under, 7,000 repairs a month are carried out. That is quite impressive. I know that it is not enough, but 7,000 are carried out each month.

This funding will allow us to carry out proper resurfacing schemes, rather than the patchwork that we have seen over the last period of time. It will be in a limited number of areas, but, as I keep emphasising, this is historic; it is a statement of intent about how we want to move forward.

Mr K Buchanan: I congratulate the Minister on his new role. I was looking for mention of the A29 bypass in his statement. There are so many potholes around Cookstown that it would be cheaper to build a bypass.

My question relates to the wise spending of the money. We see some potholes being repaired with the blast effect or whatever. Is the Minister content that the £1 million will be spent wisely? Is he content that the method of repairing potholes is the best one and is the best value for money?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his kind comments. I do not think that anybody would say that the current method of repairing potholes is the best way, but we are using the method that our budget allows. This process will be more about properly designed patchworking schemes, so I think that the money will be invested properly. As we move forward, stabilising the DFI budget, I think that we will see an improvement in our road network.

Mr Brown: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment, and I very much look forward to working with him on the Infrastructure Committee.

I very much welcome the statement. It is, of course, most appropriate that we are discussing

potholes on the first full day of Assembly business, given the huge number of constituency queries that we all receive on the issue. My question is somewhat similar to Mr Buchanan's. What steps is the Minister taking to explore innovative solutions to more quickly and efficiently fill and patch potholes in order to maximise the impact of the investment? I believe that some ideas are being trialled in council areas.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member. Even when I was previously in the Department, it was highlighted that new technologies and machinery for repairing potholes were coming on board. We will explore all those options to ensure that we use public finances most effectively.

We need money to invest in buying new equipment as well. There is limited opportunity for that for my Department. However, I am exploring all options to ensure that we are getting value for money and making the most impact that we can on the ground with the limited resources that we have.

Mr McGuigan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, comhghairdeas agus ádh mór ort. I congratulate my colleague the Minister and wish him good luck.

Any announcement that will improve the road network will obviously be welcomed by all road users. My constituency office, like those of all MLAs, has been contacted about burst tyres and damaged wheels. To elaborate on a point that has already been touched on, I was contacted last week about an experience of a cyclist —

2.00 pm

Mr Speaker: This is the time for questions, not statements, Mr McGuigan.

Mr McGuigan: He hit a pothole, came down and broke nine ribs and his pelvis. Will the Minister elaborate on how his announcement will make the road safer for cyclists?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his kind remarks. I am sorry to hear about his constituent's experience. It is worth emphasising again that our roads are used by many different users: the motorist, the pedestrian, the cyclist and others. The pothole situation makes cyclists and motorcyclists particularly vulnerable to serious injury. That is why I am keen to resolve the matter.

The scheme that we have announced today will start improving our road network. It is the start of a journey — pardon the pun — that we are on for the funding and improvement of our road network. Today's announcement shows what Ministers can do when they are in post. It is a small step, and I do not want to exaggerate it, but I assure the Member that I am looking for money elsewhere in my Department to see whether it can be spent on our road network.

Mr Bradley: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. He has part-answered my question, which is on new technologies. I note that pothole machines have been devised by JCB and are in use extensively on the mainland. Has the Minister looked at that technology? It can be a bespoke lorry or an attachment for a JCB digger.

Mr O'Dowd: It is amazing how much information people feel free to send me on social media about new technology and how to fill potholes, but my officials are better qualified than I am to examine all the suggestions.

Why would we not invest in new technology that carries out the functions more effectively and efficiently? We could then do more, but all those things have to be examined and proven to be value for money. They have to prove what they can do. Some of that funding will come from my budget; I may have to bid for more funding. I have to have the finances to invest in that sort of equipment.

Dr Aiken: I welcome the Minister to his new post. I declare an interest: I will soon get in contact with his Department about fixing a windscreen that was cracked because of a pothole.

What will we do about the utility companies that seem to spend their entire time digging up the roads, digging them up again and not working with anybody to make things work properly? Many potholes across our South Antrim constituency are caused by utility companies digging things up, not repairing the roads properly and not doing the correct remedial work to make the roads passable.

Mr O'Dowd: My understanding is that utility companies are supposed to work in cooperation with DFI Roads on a planned programme of work that understands when my Department will be carrying out work on a major resurfacing scheme or whatever. Where poor work is carried out, I encourage the Member to report it to his local division. It is important that work on

our roads is done to the highest standards, whoever carries it out.

Ms Á Murphy: There has been a lot of talk about monitoring rounds today. Will the Minister continue his prioritisation of road quality and seek further funding for addressing potholes and road surfacing in the June monitoring round?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, I intend to target the June monitoring round for further maintenance on our roads and for other matters. Maintenance of the roads will certainly be a high priority. Again, I emphasise that our roads are used by many different users: the motorist, obviously, the cyclist and the walker. We want to make sure that our roads are in a fit and safe condition for all who use them.

Ms Armstrong: Bobbing up and down today is like my normal journey down the Ards peninsula where you are up and down like a yo-yo. I welcome the Minister to his post.

I will follow on from Dr Aiken and ask the Minister to review the impact that utility companies have on our roads. Will he consider increasing from 10% the Department for Infrastructure's inspection rate of reinstated roads within the warranty period? Will he also consider extending the warranty period from two years to four years in order to give the utility companies enough time to repair the roads that they have dug up?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for her question and her comments. I am happy to review all those matters. It will not be one of the things that I look at in the next week or months, but it is certainly a programme of work that we should look at as I get my feet under the desk in the Department and move forward. As I said to Dr Aiken, if companies — utility companies or whoever — dig up our roads, they need to reinstate them in a fashion that lasts for the time that we would expect.

There is limited capacity in staff and resources in the Department, at this stage, to carry out the inspections that we would like. That is a matter for stabilising the budget and recruiting and retaining staff. The public-sector pay award, which we hope to resolve in the near future, will help me in that regard.

Mr Buckley: I welcome any money to help cure the pothole pandemic, so the announcement is welcome. This costs us huge amounts of money. In December, one pothole alone on the Northway in Portadown had 60 claims to its

name. One thing that grinds the gears of motorists even more is the inefficient way in which potholes are sometimes dealt with, where one pothole beside the major pothole —

Mr Speaker: Question, Mr Buckley.

Mr Buckley: — is left to further deteriorate. Will the Minister review that practice?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. I am aware of the pothole that he refers to. Again, when you have limited resources and finances, you carry out emergency repairs. I have no doubt that even those who carry out those repairs will tell you that that is not the standard that they want to work to. We want to get to a position where we are able to equip our workforce to carry out the repairs properly and for those repairs to be long-lasting.

There is a balance to be struck. The Member is right: we pay out significant amounts of money on compensation claims. That money would be better used to make sure that the roads are in a proper state in the first place.

Mr Baker: Does the Minister agree that the announcement reflects the importance of having locally elected Ministers in place?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes. Ministers can make those decisions. Departmental officials did a sterling job when the Assembly and Executive were down, but the reallocation of funds such as these at the end of this period can be made only by a Minister. That shows the importance of Ministers and of what they can do. Without overstating the amount that we are spending here, while £1 million is a lot of money, in global terms it is not a lot of money. However, it is a statement of intent.

Mr Kingston: I welcome the announcement of £1 million for potholes. Some of the worst examples of potholes are in unfinished roads in private developments. We lobbied for phase 2 of Buttermilk Loney in Ballysillan for five years, and, finally this week, it is getting the top layer of tarmac. In another similar development off the Ballygomartin Road at Mount Gilbert, residents have been waiting for over three years, and departmental officials have said in replies to questions from me that they wish they had more resources to put pressure on the developers. Will the Minister also seek to highlight unfinished roads in private developments where residents have bought their houses and have been waiting for years for their roads to be finished?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. It is a serious issue for people who have bought a new home and moved in but the streets have not been finished off properly. It is on my radar. I am aware of it, and I will engage with officials over the time ahead on how we can deal with it, including whether the contractor should deliver the percentage of the bond or the size of the bond. The current situation is that homeowners are on the wrong side of the balance of justice, and that has to be evened out.

Mr Blair: I add to the good wishes that have been expressed to the Minister on taking up his role and to the Committee Chair, who takes her place today in the Chamber. I will keep in touch with the Minister individually on all the local needs and questions that I have, including the Ballycorr Road in Ballyclare, which has to be one of the worst roads that I have seen.

My question is more broad-based and relates to footways. They are not mentioned in the statement. The Minister will be aware, like the rest of us, that many footways have fallen into a state of disrepair that makes them either dilapidated or dangerous. Are they included? If not, will there be a future bid for funding for those that might also include cycle paths where they are on or shared with footways?

Mr O'Dowd: This is for carriageways at the moment, but I am acutely aware of my Department's responsibility to promote active travel. When I look towards future funding rounds and stabilising my Department's budget, I assure the Member that active travel will be a priority. Improving footpath works and cycle pathways makes a significant difference. I can think of one area in my constituency around Craigavon lakes, which was years ahead of its time in developing a proper footpath and cycle network. In the past two years, it has been improved, and that has made a significant difference.

Ms Ferguson: I pass on my best wishes to my colleague on taking up his new position and to the new Chair of the Committee, who is also here.

I very much welcome the money that has become available. I would like to ensure that the western division gets its fair share, as you mentioned. It would be remiss of me if I did not mention the Northland Road in the constituency of Foyle, in the city of Derry. Local residents and neighbourhoods alert people on a daily basis to the dangers due to huge potholes on

that road. Just on Saturday, once again, it was for the whole day, and it went viral on social media. I want to highlight the Northland Road and ensure that you, as Minister, ensure that the western division prioritises it for resurfacing.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for her kind comments and her question.

Which road network each division highlights will be a matter for the divisional manager. I encourage the Member to engage with the divisional manager on that. It is worth noting and reminding ourselves that our road network has fallen into disrepair over several years and been underinvested in for over a decade. Climate change and significant downpours of rain cause significant damage to our road network. If that is followed by frost, you are in for significant problems. I have taken a new interest in the weather forecast in my role as Infrastructure Minister. I hope that we are now heading into spring but there is still potential for heavy showers and frost, which cause significant damage to our road network.

Mr Speaker: Danny Donnelly.

Mr Donnelly: My question has already been answered. Thank you.

Mr Clarke: Like others, I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. I worked with him previously, and, hopefully, we will have the same relationship going forward.

Minister, you responded to two Members about checking on the utilities. Of course, when your Department allocates jobs, some of those jobs turn out to be substandard and fail quite quickly after the repair. Will any work be done on that to ensure that the money is spent wisely?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his kind comments.

Where we have the resources for long-term repair work to be carried out, it should be carried out properly. Unfortunately, some of our maintenance crews have to go out and literally pour a bucket of asphalt or tar into a hole, because that is all that they can do with the resources and the money that they have. Those repairs do not last. The scheme is about ensuring that we have a resurfacing programme whereby it is done properly, roads are sealed and the weather is kept out for a long time. There will always be financial pressures on all Departments, but I am of the view that, when you use public money, it should be used

properly and efficiently and provide value for money.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the £1 million. However, up to just last month, there were 11,000 potholes across Londonderry and Strabane. Does the Minister agree that it is more important that we invest in our roads than pay compensation? Can the Minister give any indication of the expenditure on compensation in 2023?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not have the figures available, but I am happy to share them with the Member and lodge them in the Assembly Library so that other Members have access to them. We all know that the roads are in such a state of disrepair that vehicles are being damaged and compensation claims are being paid out. I need to rebalance that to ensure that our roads are being fixed and compensation claims are minimised. That makes economic sense.

Mr Dunne: Last year, in the Ards and North Down Borough Council area in my constituency, 3,800 potholes were reported, while the council received the lowest funding allocation across all councils. That left many roads across Bangor, Holywood, Donaghadee and Millisle in a truly shocking, disgraceful and dangerous condition. Will the Minister commit to reviewing the intervention level for DFI to repair potholes and changing it from 50 millimetres back to 20 millimetres, to truly start getting on top of the pothole crisis?

Mr O'Dowd: It would require the stabilisation of the DFI budget for me to make that commitment. The reason that we are in this scenario is as I set out earlier. The original starting point for carrying out emergency repairs was around £60 million; that is what we hoped we would have. We have £21 million to carry out the same repairs. If we are to get to a point where we look at lesser defects on the roads, we will have to have a significant increase in the Department's finances. When I look at the challenges around the Executive table, I see that I will have to work in a collective nature with my Executive colleagues. There are priorities upon priorities upon priorities, but I can assure you that I will fight DFI's corner.

2.15 pm

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he assure me that my constituency, North Down, will get its fair share of the £1 million?

Mr O'Dowd: I assure the Member that the four divisions will each receive around £250,000. It will be up to the divisional managers to ensure that that is used to best effect. How it is used will be their decision; I will not interfere in any way. We have to look to the future, in medium- to long-term planning, and ensure that divisions get their finances on the basis of need and that the areas with most challenges get the most money, but, at this moment, for this short-term intervention, it is a simple division by four.

Ms Sugden: I congratulate the Minister on his reappointment. A notorious road in the Riverside retail park in Coleraine has fallen into serious disrepair. Thousands of cars use that road daily. The issue is that it is not owned by anyone and redress for the individuals affected therefore cannot happen. There is legislation that enables the road to be adopted, but it requires the road to be brought up to standard first. Is the Minister willing to look at that, so that the burden does not fall on the general public but lies with his Department?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for her question and her kind comments. In reality, it will fall on the general public. If I adopt the road without it being repaired, the general public will have to pay for its upgrade. One way or another, the residents of that area and of a broader area will pay for it. I never make policy on the hoof. I am happy to look at issues when they are brought to my attention, but I do not think that there is an easy solution to that one.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Minister's statement and questions. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment.

Private Members' Business

Childcare: High-quality and Affordable Provision

Ms Brogan: I beg to move:

That this Assembly recognises that the costs of childcare are unaffordable for many and that hard-working families are struggling every month to meet these costs; further recognises that the childcare sector is in need of urgent and significant investment in order to put the sector on a sustainable footing, to improve terms and conditions for workers and to deliver the high-quality and accessible provision that families and children deserve; notes that without affordable childcare provision many people, particularly women, are unable to take up or return to employment; agrees that affordable childcare would have a hugely positive impact on our local economy; acknowledges that high-quality childcare and early years education can help to give children the best start in life, support children with special educational needs (SEN) to help address educational disadvantage and promote emotional health and well-being amongst children; and calls on the Executive to work collectively to deliver a strategy that makes high-quality childcare, affordable for all families, a priority.

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

Ms Brogan: I am really pleased to be here this afternoon to move the motion on behalf of Sinn Féin. I am delighted that one of the first motions to be debated in this new Assembly is on the need to prioritise high-quality, affordable childcare.

For almost two years, in the absence of a functioning Assembly and Executive, the Assembly's all-party group on early education and childcare has worked tirelessly to address the serious issues and concerns that the childcare sector faces. It is testament to the childcare providers, users and organisations involved in the all-party group that we are debating childcare at the earliest opportunity. As chairperson of the all-party group, I thank all

those involved in the group for their invaluable input to the meetings. Members are honest about their personal challenges and the struggles within the sector, and parents and users are so forthcoming about the serious problems that they face in trying to pay for childcare.

I give a special thank-you to Aoife Hamilton and Employers for Childcare for the work that they do as secretariat of the all-party group. Aoife, Employers for Childcare and the all-party group members have been a driving force in ensuring that the early years and childcare strategy is not only progressed but is ambitious and meets the needs of children, families and providers across the North, and that the expertise, knowledge and views of those in the sector are taken into consideration throughout the development of the strategy. Whilst the work of the all-party group has been of great value, further progress was stalled in the absence of an Executive. The motion:

"calls on the Executive to work collectively to deliver a strategy that makes high-quality childcare, affordable for all families, a priority."

It is clear to see that childcare is a massive issue for people right across the North right now. Very often we hear about the rising cost of childcare and the impact that that has on parents and families who are already struggling with the cost of living. We talk about the very real and concerning pressures that our childcare providers face right now in trying to keep their doors open, with increased operating costs and difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff. We saw just last week that a day nursery in Lisburn will have to close its doors this month because of increasing costs and staffing pressures. That is not only putting untold pressures on families to find new childcare arrangements in just a matter of weeks, it is putting hard-working staff out of work. We really need to do better for everyone involved.

We also understand how poor childcare provision is a massive barrier to women who are trying to join the labour market or to get back into work after having a family, and the detrimental effect that that has on the local economy. In rural areas, such as my constituency of West Tyrone, it is particularly difficult for parents to find adequate childcare provision, with many relying heavily on the support of grandparents and their extended family. We must do more to improve the access to suitable childcare right across the North. That includes adequate childcare for families with children with special educational needs.

Children with additional needs and their families have been overlooked and neglected for far too long. We must ensure that a new early years and childcare strategy focuses on meeting their needs as well as the needs of others. It is also crucial that we recognise the role of early education and childcare in helping to lift families out of poverty. High-quality, affordable childcare plays an essential role in tackling disadvantage by enabling parents to work and helping to give children and young people the best start in life.

There is no doubt that the cost of childcare is having a crippling effect on families in the North right now. According to Employers for Childcare's most recent survey in 2023, the current average cost for a full-time childcare place is £10,036 per year. That is an increase of 14% since 2021. For 41% of families, childcare is the largest monthly outgoing ahead of mortgage or rental costs, and 56% of families have to use means other than their income to pay for childcare, including savings, credit cards and loans. The costs are simply unaffordable for families. They place an unfair burden on families who are already struggling, and it is unacceptable that they are being put in that position. We really need to see urgent and significant investment in the childcare sector.

As chair of the all-party group, together with my fellow members, I listened to many people sharing their experiences and concerns about delivering and availing themselves of childcare. We have also looked at the delivery of childcare in different jurisdictions and countries. It has become abundantly clear that delivering childcare in a fair and sustainable way is difficult. Producing a properly funded childcare strategy that delivers quality care for children, affordability for parents and sustainability for providers will not be easy, but it is crucial that we get it right. It is important that we create our own childcare model and strategy that works for the people of the North.

We expect a strategy that puts the interests of the child at its core, supports early development, addresses disadvantage, meets special educational needs and supports the childcare workforce. We want childcare to be affordable and to support parents to return to work or take up new employment opportunities. As part of the all-party group's work, we examined England's scheme, which claims to offer 30 hours of free childcare. Although that sounds good, in practice, it is not meeting the needs of parents, providers or children. We need our own model that ensures the sustainability of the sector by protecting workers' conditions and pay and that reduces fees for parents to drive down the costs for

families. That approach would improve the sector's financial sustainability, thereby attracting new childcare providers. It would make childcare more affordable for parents, and it would make it easier to attract and retain childcare staff. It would create a relationship between government and the sector, which could be harnessed to maintain the high standards in the sector and to ensure a focus on childcare's educational benefits.

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

We expect childcare providers to do a lot of the heavy lifting, but providers can only support us if we support them. The sector employs around 10,000 people, the vast majority of whom are women. According to the Federation of Small Businesses, businesses in the childcare sector are most likely to be headed up by women. Providers also include charities, local voluntary groups, not-for-profits, social enterprises and self-employed childminders. In a recent survey, more than 40% of childcare providers described their financial situation as "struggling", and over 80% said that they were making a loss or just breaking even. Without direct support, more than three quarters anticipated increasing their fees, and the current mechanisms of support — for example, tax-free childcare — do not meet the needs of many families here.

We really have an exciting opportunity right now to deliver a top-class early years and childcare strategy, but, as I say, we must get it right. I urge the Minister of Education to work with us; to engage extensively with the experts in the field who have the experience and understanding of what is needed to protect the sector and help it flourish for the benefit of us all; and to co-design the strategy with childcare providers, parents, businesses right across the economy and those involved in inspection and regulation of services. As we are waiting for the strategy to be implemented, it is also important for the Minister to consider re-establishing a childcare reference group to deal with live issues that the sector faces. I also urge the Minister to clearly set out a timeline for the publication of the early years and childcare strategy to ensure that there are no more delays to its development.

Sinn Féin wants to see urgent and significant investment delivered to the childcare sector so that we can support the development of children, including children with special educational needs, reduce the cost of childcare for parents, ensure that the childcare sector is sustainable and supported and recognise the invaluable work of childcare staff and improve

their pay and conditions. I hope that you will all work with us and support the motion.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Robbie Butler to move the amendment.

Mr Butler: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after the last "help" and insert:

"prevent educational disadvantage and promote emotional health and well-being amongst children; calls on the Minister of Education to listen to the views of parents and businesses by way of a deliberate consultation; and further calls on the Executive to work collectively to deliver a strategy that makes high-quality childcare, affordable for all families, a priority."

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Robbie, you have 10 minutes to propose the amendment, and, Mike, you will have five minutes to make a winding-up speech. Please open the debate on the amendment.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. Some of you will be glad to hear that there was a printer malfunction in my office up the stairs, so I do not have a well-crafted written speech like the Member from across the Chamber who proposed the motion. I will be kind of winging it, but the good thing about winging it on this topic is that we have been talking about it for around two years, particularly on the all-party group, which the Member who proposed the motion chairs brilliantly. It has been quite a journey on that all-party group, and I mirror the chair's comments about the secretariat support that we get from Employers For Childcare and, in particular, from Aoife Hamilton.

I know that this is a very important subject for all the parties, because a number of amendments were tabled in the Business Office. Thankfully, ours was accepted. If the Members opposite and those around the Chamber will indulge me, I will say that the amendment is quite moderate but very important. It changes only a couple of words in the motion, and I will outline, at the very start, the first word that I am proposing to change and why. Without reading it verbatim, the amendment, at the very start, replaces the word "address" with "prevent". As legislators, we need to be a lot more deliberate about the language that we choose when we are proposing ambitious strategies, policies or plans to help change the lives of the people whom we purport to support. I will expand a

little bit on why I think that is important, but, during questions earlier to the Education Minister following his statement, it was brilliant to see the number of Members who spoke about special educational needs, children with disabilities and those who need additional support.

As has already been asked — we will probably repeat this many times — why do we need to do this? There are a number of reasons.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for giving way. You mentioned those with special educational needs, and I would like the Minister to consider that issue specifically. I have been contacted by a number of families who have children with special needs and are having real difficulty accessing any type of childcare. There is a reluctance and a fear among childcare providers because they are not getting the support that they need in order to give those children the attention and support that they need.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for her intervention. I will jump on that point now. It is better to do that than to try to jump about in the mess that I have written down here. I was going to raise that point, because a constituent of mine, who is also a constituent of the Minister, contacted me this very week. One of the issues for the sector is that there are not enough spaces for parents who are applying, but that is further compounded for families with a child who perhaps has some other difficulties and needs additional support. The businesses and the sector do not have the capacity to support such families, and, unfortunately, children are facing discrimination at the very earliest age.

It is unintended discrimination, but, because they cannot access the childcare services that other children can, they are, unfortunately, being disadvantaged at the earliest point in their life.

2.30 pm

The Minister will know, as will all Members in the Chamber — our inboxes are becoming inundated — about the difficulties that many parents in Northern Ireland face. The difficulties are twofold: one is the high cost of childcare, making it unaffordable, while the other is its lack of availability and accessibility. The business sector is now gearing up to get involved in the conversation. That is reflected in the second part of my amendment, because what I want to see happen is that, when the Minister embarks on policy planning, it will be not just parents'

voices that are included in the co-design and co-production but the voices of those who represent the business sector. The FSB, the CBI and Women in Business are now contacting us to reiterate the absolute need to have their voices heard in order to ensure that what is crafted and created speaks to them and meets need.

In the first instance, you would be surprised if I did not speak up for children, Minister, because childcare should be centred on the child. It really needs to be built around the child. I would like you to reflect on the recommendations that we have already heard about in 'A Fair Start' and, indeed, in the most recent independent review of education, because they all point the same way. I hope that your Department will be one of the more ambitious ones in deploying what are termed children's rights impact assessments (CRIAs). I would like to see this being one of the first policies that has them embedded throughout, because, if we are serious about tackling disadvantage, educational underachievement and barriers to a full life experience for all children, we need to ensure that key policies, which, by the way, are a piece of infrastructure for everyone, address the needs of the child.

Why are we doing this? The Member who moved the motion referred to the fact that a full-time childcare place costs over £10,000 on average. When that is broken down, I think that 25% of parents are paying over £1,000 a month. When faced with such a bill, in addition to the cost-of-living crisis that we are in, crippling mortgage rates, fuel prices and food inflation, parents and families have to make decisions.

I have two grown-up kids, as you know, and I now have three little kids. With the first two, I did not need childcare. I worked shifts in the Fire Service, so it was OK. Now my wife has had to make a decision. She is a nurse and has had to reduce her hours to 30 hours a week to overcome the difficulties not only in accessing childcare but in doing so mechanically. Perhaps the Minister needs to pick up on that when he responds. As has already been picked up on, there is gender disparity, and I am displaying it in my own blinking house. I try to be as flexible as I can to respond to need, but, unfortunately, owing to the way in which we are set up at the moment, although, again, they should not be, an unintended consequence is that women are discriminated against. It is not just when it comes to accessing work. We know that those who work full-time get access to higher levels of training and more opportunities for promotion

and career enhancement. That should not be the case in 2024.

I want to talk about the availability of childcare places. The Minister will be well aware of the difficulties in our constituency of Lagan Valley. Sadly, this week, one of our longest-established and best childcare facilities, Birdies, announced its intention to close its doors. I do not know all the details behind that decision, but I suspect that part of the issue is staff availability and fair pay for staff. We want to pay those people a good wage, and we should. We should have professional training for them. How do we do that, however? Centres are faced with crippling costs, whether for fuel, rent, rates or whatever. They are also trying to pay their staff, and the staff just are not there any more. It is one of those fields in which it is so hard to recruit. Again, I hope that a full-circle strategy will speak to that.

On Ms Dillon's point, I recently had a parent contact me about the barriers that her child now faces. That centres on the fact that the child has additional needs. That is why I am happy with the amendment that we have offered to this excellent motion. We absolutely support the motion and hope that you support our amendment. There should be co-design/co-production of any strategy or plan that comes through that involves families whose kids face the most challenging start to life, perhaps in accessing waiting lists in the health service or professional help from paediatricians or with speech and language. It must not be done in isolation. It must not be a stand-alone policy. It must be one that will speak to many policies, such as those on anti-poverty, gender imbalance in the workplace or addressing educational underachievement. This policy must have the capacity to speak across all those sectors.

There is a wealth of evidence at hand, from the English, Welsh and Scottish models and that in the Republic of Ireland, and wide recognition that many of the issues that we will discuss are well-versed but need to be faced into. I challenge the Minister that we need to see a costed options paper as soon as possible, so that the Assembly and the relevant Committees can get their teeth into it. The strategy needs to be co-designed, forward-facing, ambitious and child-centred and to underpin an achievement that Northern Ireland can be proud of and lead the way in on these islands.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I should have said, and it was remiss of me not to have done, that all other Members who wish to speak after Mr Butler will have five minutes.

As this is Cheryl Brownlee's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden or first speech is made without interruption.

Ms Brownlee: I count it as a privilege to represent my home constituency of East Antrim. It is a day of mixed emotions for me. While I am filled with an overwhelming sense of pride, I pause to remember and pay tribute to my late friend and colleague David Hilditch, who served the people of East Antrim as an MLA from 1998 until his untimely passing last year. It is an honour for me, having worked with Davy in his constituency office for over 10 years, to have been entrusted by my party to take his place and carry on his legacy. I cannot thank them enough for entrusting me with that responsibility. I also thank my family and send them all my love for all their support and particularly their patience in the past few months.

Like Davy, I commit to serve all the people of East Antrim. With the return of the institutions, we are faced with a fresh opportunity to deliver on the issues that really matter. I commend the motion and am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to today's discussion. I am extremely passionate about the provision of high-quality, affordable childcare. As a 19-year-old lone parent, I lived through the struggles of trying to access childcare that was affordable for a low-income household but still offered the high levels of care that we expect for our little ones.

I often hear people refer to childcare as a barrier, but I do not think that it is. A barrier can be knocked down or navigated around. For some, childcare is a complete and utter brick wall. In my constituency, we have some incredible, established childcare providers who undoubtedly offer an extremely high-quality service. However, the stark reality is that people like me, when I was that 19-year-old lone parent working multiple jobs and struggling to make ends meet, are priced out of that service.

I am sure that I speak for all of us when I say that I am committed to striving for high-quality, accessible and affordable childcare for everyone in Northern Ireland. One of the critical pillars to that service are our childminders. I had the privilege of having both my children cared for lovingly and receiving an incredibly high standard of care from our childminders, Jenny and Paula. For people like them, and many others in this sector, increased regulations, demands and scrutiny have left them feeling pushed out. I believe and hope that the

Executive will offer more assistance in reducing the burden on our childminders.

I was also particularly pleased to see the motion's inclusion of children with additional educational needs. My son, Lyle, has been referred to and is currently on the under-4's pathway for children with additional needs. He also has type 1 diabetes. The infrastructure to support children like Lyle is not in place, meaning that children are not receiving the critical intervention, support and resources that they so require. I know all too well the extra pressures and stress that that puts on parents, with the intensity of the process, the complexity of appointments and the constant psychological battle that comes with worrying whether you are doing the right thing. I am proud of my party's track record in supporting childcare. When the sector was on the brink of collapse during the pandemic, it was a DUP Minister who stepped up to support it. We do not want to stop there, however. Our party has consistently campaigned to help working families by introducing 30 hours of free childcare, and we will continue in that pursuit. A recent DUP survey found that of 1,000 parents, a staggering 85% had their return to work impacted by childcare costs, with a quarter of parents also saying that childcare subsumed nearly a full wage in their household. That has to be tackled.

As I draw to a close, I reiterate my support for the motion, and I join others in calling on the Executive to work collaboratively to deliver a strategy that makes high-quality childcare affordable for all families as a priority. I believe that the lack of affordable and high-quality childcare will serve only to cripple families, stunt economic growth and curb our children's future opportunities. We must do more.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Nicholl: Principal Deputy Speaker, I congratulate you on your elevation to the role, and I wish you all the best in it.

This is my maiden speech, so I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor, Clare Bailey, who was a fierce champion for the environment, women's reproductive rights, social justice issues and marginalised voices. Those are areas in which I will not fall short.

I arrived in Belfast from Zimbabwe when I was 14 years old. I have always been grateful to this city and its people for welcoming me and for becoming my home when I no longer had one. So much of what I do and what I did as a councillor is done out of a sense of duty and indebtedness, but also with a strong sense of

having arrived as a child, feeling like an outsider and wanting to make sure that no other children felt that way. That is why I have done so much work with asylum seekers and refugees.

When I was elected to the Assembly, I had stood for election for children, but this time it was because of my own. My husband, Fergal Sherry — he is watching at the moment and was one of the other brilliant things to come out of moving to Belfast — and I are very proud to live in South Belfast and to be raising our children there. Whilst I was canvassing during the Assembly election campaign, heavily pregnant, every day, multiple times, people raised the issue of childcare. I was experiencing the issue in my house, and colleagues were experiencing it in their houses. Constituents were suffering from the sheer lack of affordable childcare in Northern Ireland, and I realised that something needed to be done. I made a promise that I would do everything in my power to address it if I got to the Assembly, so here I am.

Shortly after I was elected, Naomi Long appointed a childcare working group in the Alliance Party: a number of MLAs and researchers. For the past two years, we have been put to work looking at childcare policy and how we can address the issues in it. We met Employers for Childcare, whose Aoife Hamilton has done amazing work on the all-party group along with Nicola Brogan. It is a wonderful all-party group to be in, and it has raised so many important issues that, perhaps, have not previously been brought to the fore. Including the Federation of Small Businesses, the Northern Ireland Childminding Association, the Northern Ireland Chamber, Melted Parents — some of whom are here today — Early Years and the Stranmillis College early years academics, the list of stakeholders who have done such amazing work in the sector goes on and on. While all brought different perspectives to the childcare crisis, there was one resounding message, which is that there is a childcare crisis, and the crisis is now.

We developed our policies, and we listened to stakeholders and heard what they had to say. We saw what was happening across the water and how the free hours model is not working and not serving families. It works very well for a very small number, but, for the majority, it does not. It is actually widening inequalities, and we need to address that. We have proposed an affordable, bespoke childcare scheme that is child-centred and puts quality, flexibility, affordability, training and experience at the heart of our policy.

We want to see supply-side funding with the requirement that providers ensure that those mechanisms are all put in place.

2.45 pm

There is a lot of work for the Minister in his in tray, and I know from the several occasions that I have bumped into him in the corridor that childcare will be a priority of his. That is welcome, and it is welcome that all the parties are united in prioritising it. We have to get it right, because childcare is not just babysitting. It is child development, early education and early intervention. It is a means by which to improve economic activity levels. It is about gender equality in the labour market. It is essential social and economic infrastructure, and it has to be invested in accordingly. It will be expensive — we know that — but it is far more expensive not to invest in it.

I am delighted to be on the Education Committee, and I am delighted to work with all parties on this important issue. I look forward to our delivering a scheme that will really suit parents and children, because, at the end of the day, that is what it is really about. It is about our children, and there is no better investment that a Government can make than in the next generation.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Kate. Thankfully, your first speech was made without interruptions. I should have asked Members for that at the start.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. I take the opportunity to congratulate you on taking your position.

I will start by acknowledging the common feeling across the Chamber that the need for a childcare strategy is universally accepted. While I welcome the debate, the issue is not the lack of consensus on the question but the lack of delivery on the commitment. That commitment was first made in 2011's Programme for Government. Thirteen years later, we are still only at the debating stage, and our childcare sector is now on the brink of collapse.

We can all clearly see the societal impact of our failure to see childcare as a sustainable part of our infrastructure that helps to keep the wheels turning in our workplaces, homes and schools. We all have constituents who have told us of the pressure that they are under from eye-watering costs. They are absolutely horrific costs to the home. Indeed, I have no doubt that

we are being watched right now by many parents, some of whom are here in the Gallery, who have sat around kitchen tables and had that conversation about whether it is even worth it to stay working at all. We all know parents who could not make the sums add up and have reluctantly left their jobs. Moreover, we know that it is predominantly women who are locked out of the workforce as a result. Our childcare providers also cannot make those sums add up. They struggle every day to keep the lights on. Faced with those truths, everyone should recognise that the status quo of economic self-sabotage is totally untenable.

Mr Durkan: I thank my colleague for giving way. As a father of four, three of whom are young children, I am well aware of the cost of childcare, but I am also acutely aware of the value of good childcare. Over the years, we have been blessed with the best. Does the Member agree that the support that is needed in the short term and in the strategy must also work for our priceless registered childminders, who are often unacceptably forgotten?

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

Ms McLaughlin: Absolutely. Childminders are fundamental to the childcare infrastructure. We have over 2,000 registered childminders watching in excess of 12,000 of our children, and they are key to delivering quality, accessible and flexible childcare.

It is really time to deliver. Yes, let us agree a strategy without delay, but the truth is that a strategy will take time, and that is time that we simply do not have. Let us recognise the immediacy of the crisis and act now. Every day we hear news of more providers shutting their doors and employers struggling to retain and recruit their staff. We all said that this was a day-1 priority, so let us keep to our word. More than a year ago, the SDLP published proposals to invest in the sector and bring down costs to families. One year on, parents and providers need that support from the Executive more than ever. That should include investing in the sector to freeze costs, ensuring that all parents are aware of the support that is available and making a collective approach to the British Government to expand access to tax-free childcare. We also need urgent progress on the review of the minimum standards for registered childminders. There is no time to waste, and those solutions are on the table. Today, the Minister of Education should walk out of here and pull the right stakeholders together in an advisory group, with the voices of parents front

and centre, and get about the business of delivering support. If we truly prioritise the issue, it will be action, not words, that parents are looking for.

There is enormous potential. We know what works and what does not. We can look at the failure of the free hours model in England and at the promise of models in countries like Norway and Sweden that invest from a child's first days to transform outcomes and cap costs. Let us stretch our ambition and acknowledge that this is an investment rather than a cost. More importantly, once and for all, let us get this done.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: As this is Danny Baker's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is a convention that a Member's first speech is made without interruption.

Mr Baker: Go raibh maith agat [*Translation: Thank you*] Principal Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your new role.

I am delighted to finally stand in the Chamber to fully represent the people of West Belfast and Colin. Throughout the years, I have been lucky to have had many role models representing the area, like Michael Ferguson, Sue Ramsey and Jennifer McCann, who all originated from the Colin and served the community with distinction. As one of four Sinn Féin MLAs in West Belfast, I am privileged to have the support and guidance of Órlaithí, Aisling, Pat and our MP, Paul Maskey.

I am proud to be from the Colin area, and to be its representative is a great honour. I will work tirelessly to be its voice in the Assembly. I grew up in Twinbrook and attended St Colm's High School, a school that built my confidence and inspired me to believe that I could achieve anything if I worked hard. I have to give great credit to the teachers and staff of that amazing school. As one of many who failed their 11-plus, I can say that that school instilled a sense of leadership that gave me the opportunity to stand here today. St Colm's needs a new, state-of-the-art school that will serve the needs of the young people of the Colin. They deserve a new and modern school, and I will continue to raise that with the Minister of Education.

I have been a community and political activist for as long as I can remember. I first became a political representative in Belfast in 2017. It was the desire to represent and be the voice of young people in my community that made me want to be an elected representative. Over the past two years, I have been working closely

with families who have children with special educational needs, and I listen to the struggles they face every day. I have to pay tribute to the Colin autism group, SEN Space, Kids Together and SHINE, which do great work in west Belfast and Lisburn. I will take seriously my role in addressing the systematic failures that those families and children face. It must be a priority that we all work together, across all Departments, in addressing the needs of children with special educational needs, giving the long-term solutions that are so desperately required and ensuring that financial resources are given for early intervention.

Our youth providers and our community and voluntary sector have been hit hard over the past number of years and face significant cuts. They go above and beyond to support our young people and communities in good times and difficult times. They need our continuous support. If it were not for their commitment to our communities and to the most vulnerable in society, we would be in a far worse situation today. One in five children in the North lives in poverty. It is vital that we deliver an anti-poverty strategy to prevent that staggering figure continuing and to address the needs in our communities. During this term, we have an opportunity to make the changes needed to support our special educational needs children and families, our community and voluntary sector and the most vulnerable in society.

Sinn Féin wants a childcare strategy that gives children the best start in life while delivering affordability to their parents. We want to build on the work already taking place to tackle educational underachievement, as well as improving support for children with special educational needs. Often, children with special educational needs and their parents are not prioritised. That needs to change. Early intervention is key. Investing in childcare is about investing in people, our economy and the future. Unlike the Tories, we want to drive economic growth not with poverty, insecurity and fear but with support, opportunity and progress. Key to delivering the childcare strategy is supporting the sustainability of our providers, whether voluntary, community, private or public sector. Not only does the provision of childcare underpin women's access to employment and support their professional advancement throughout motherhood, but the sector itself is the largest employer of women here. We also want a strategy that supports recruitment and retention by improving the terms and conditions of childcare workers, including self-employed childminders, whose role is often overlooked, especially in meeting needs in rural areas.

The motion sets the tone for a new Assembly, and the tone is ambitious. I doubt that there is anyone in the Chamber who does not support those goals, but the key to progress is working together. We started that process last week, not just by reinstating power-sharing but by the unanimous cross-party agreement to call on the British Government to deliver proper funding. Proper funding will play a key role in delivering quality, affordable, accessible and sustainable childcare. I call for all-party support for the motion and the amendment.

Mr Buckley: I begin by congratulating my friend, Cheryl Brownlee, on an amazing maiden speech. I know, looking back, that our late colleague David Hilditch would be so proud of the contribution that Cheryl has made not only in her role in the House, in the seat that he occupied, but for the fantastic service that she is providing for the constituents of East Antrim, and I wish her every success as she continues to do that.

Family life is the heartbeat of Northern Ireland's communities, regardless of background. We have always been a region that placed great emphasis and pride on the development and care of our young people. I am sure that, if we all look back, we can think of family or community support structures that supported us all during our upbringing. We have to admit that societal fluctuations, financial pressures and familiar support structures have not only changed but, in many cases, completely eroded away. Working families have faced the blunt end of those changes, which is having a profound impact on their family life. It is an issue that strikes at the heart of our communities, impacting on the lives of working parents, hindering economic growth and perpetuating inequalities. Childcare costs have reached staggering new heights, leaving many families grappling with an impossible choice: to work and struggle to afford childcare or stay at home and sacrifice their careers.

The reality is stark. For far too many parents, the cost of childcare outweighs the benefits of returning to work. That is not just a financial burden; it is a barrier to economic participation and advancement. Young families in Portadown, Lurgan and Banbridge have reached out to me on this very issue. For some, 40% of all household income can go out on childcare — 40%. Wholly unsustainable. They are concerned that they are being left behind, and it is only fair that we right that wrong. The impact of the crisis extends far beyond individual families. It reverberates throughout —

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: Yes.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for raising that percentage and making us all aware of it. Does he realise that it is not only the direct cost of childcare but taxation on the family home that causes hardships too?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for the intervention. He is absolutely right: it transpires across so many aspects of family life.

The impact of the crisis extends far beyond individual families. It reverberates throughout our community and our economy, stifling productivity and hindering growth. When parents are forced to choose between their jobs and caring for their children, our workforce is deprived of valuable talent and expertise, businesses lose out on skilled workers and our economy suffers as a result. For many young professional women in Northern Ireland, we proudly trumpeted the smashing of barriers to career opportunities and advancements and rightly so, only to cruelly pull the rug from under them as they are forced out of employment by crippling childcare costs.

It does not have to be this way. We have the power to enact change and build a future in which every child has access to quality, affordable childcare and every parent has the opportunity to pursue their career without sacrificing their family's well-being. That is why I call for free, funded childcare provision in Northern Ireland. It is time for us to invest in our families, prioritise the well-being of our children and support working parents in their pursuit of economic security. By providing affordable childcare, we can alleviate the financial strain on families, empowering parents to re-enter the workforce or advance in their careers, and stimulate economic growth through increased productivity and participation.

3.00 pm

Beyond those economic benefits, to invest in childcare is to invest in our future. It is an investment in the next generation, ensuring that every child has the opportunity not only to thrive and learn but to reach their full potential. I know that the Minister gets this issue. I know that he cares and that he is focused on delivery, but he

simply cannot do this on his own. The issue falls across so many Departments. Yes, the Minister can lead on a childcare strategy, and I know that he will, but I will watch with interest to see how that cross-departmental involvement comes in once the hard financial realities hit.

Let us stand together and demand free, funded childcare provision in Northern Ireland. Let us build a future where no family is burdened by the exorbitant costs of childcare and every child has the right to flourish.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Nick Mathison is next to speak. Since this is Nick's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that the convention is that a Member's first speech is made without interruption.

Mr Mathison: It is an honour and a privilege to give my maiden speech today as one of the two Alliance Members for Strangford. I want to say, from the outset, that I am committed to representing everyone in the constituency where I grew up and where I am bringing up my family; it truly is a great privilege. I also want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor in that seat, Lord Weir. Lord Weir served the constituencies of North Down and Strangford with distinction from 1998, as well as holding the office of Education Minister on two separate occasions.

I am aware, as the new Chair of the Education Committee, that the issue of childcare will be high on the Committee's agenda, but, as the Committee is yet to meet, I think that I should limit my comments as Chair to say no more than that I hope and trust that all the members of that Committee will work together to support the delivery of the much-needed childcare strategy.

I speak in support of the motion and the amendment. The amendment adds some considerations about the need for wider consultation, and I am happy to support that.

Childcare is, indeed, in a state of crisis. That has been set out clearly by every Member who has spoken. Tackling the affordability element of that is vital. Northern Ireland needs a bespoke scheme that invests in the childcare sector, making it sustainable, and requires that, in return for that investment, costs come down.

I want to be clear in my contribution. The issue of cost will be covered in some detail, which is quite right, but I want to be clear that, for me and my party, childcare is very much part of a wider early education system. Quality,

affordable childcare can have a significant positive impact on our children; it goes far beyond the issue of improving access to work for parents, important as that is. Members will be aware of the importance of the first 1,000 days of a child's life. So many of the factors that influence a child's health, development, well-being and life chances are best impacted through policy intervention at that stage. By ensuring that we have a child-centred, affordable and high-quality early years and childcare system, we can positively shape the future life chances of children and young people.

I am pleased that the motion makes clear reference to special educational needs and ensuring that support for children with additional needs is well provided for in any childcare strategy. We know that parents and guardians of children with additional needs are much less likely to use childcare and that they report significant and substantial struggles in accessing childcare that is appropriate for their children's needs. The recent RSM report detailed that 46% of parents of children with complex needs faced clear challenges in getting access to those places.

Our future childcare strategy must be based on an understanding of the factors that are specific to children with additional needs, including the need to ensure that settings are qualified and confident to meet those children's needs effectively. It is also vital to acknowledge that childcare has a key role in tackling poverty. We must invest in settings that wrap support around families to safeguard children and address the needs of the most vulnerable families in society. I pay tribute to the work of the Community Daycare Network and thank it for its extensive engagement with the all-party group and with my party. I have learned so much from the network about the important role that childcare settings, particularly those at the heart of some of our most disadvantaged communities, will play in the lives not just of the children in their care but of their wider families. We must ensure that such settings are supported in any childcare strategy that is brought forward and that the development of our early learning and childcare strategy is viewed through a clear anti-poverty lens.

Although we lag far behind our counterparts across the UK, Ireland and Europe on the issue, we have a chance to get childcare provision right. We know that the 30 free hours model is not working, and I urge the Minister to look at options as widely as he can across the board. Without the required workforce strategy and investment, simply creating demand

without addressing supply will not deliver. In Northern Ireland, we need provision that is inclusive and accessible to all children. Alliance has been raising the need to address childcare provision for many years, and I pay tribute to former Member Chris Lyttle, who has been doing so since as far back as 2010. He really blazed a trail in that regard. Regrettably, Ministers directly responsible for delivering on a strategy have failed to do so, so now must be the time to deliver. Parents and children in Northern Ireland expect and deserve nothing less from the Assembly.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Nick. I call Paul Frew.

Mr Frew: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I could call you something else that you were promoted to last week, but I will not. I congratulate you on your post. I also congratulate all Members who have made their maiden speech today. It is not easy, and it has been on a big subject, so congratulations to them all, not least to my colleague from East Antrim and to Nick Mathison, who mentioned Lord Weir and his contribution to this place. We are very appreciative of that, so I thank him for doing so.

The family is the brick of society. If there is one thing that the Assembly and the Executive, which is a different place, can do, it is support and build on those bricks. Raising children is the greatest privilege of all, but it is not easy, so the Government must do everything that they can to make sure that families get as much support as they can give, away from the family setting. If there is a message that can go out of this place today to send a clear signal to those hard-pressed mums and dads, it is, first, that we listen and, secondly, that we are driven to action. We have always said that we have been listening, but we have never acted. Let us hope that things will change in this place.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. I am enjoying his passion and the direction in which he is taking the debate. He started really strongly on the family, but families are now slightly different in their make-up. We have a growing number of single-parent families, and single parents find it even more difficult, when there is only one income coming in, so I hope that the development of this policy is an opportunity. Does the Member agree that there needs to be the ambition to factor it in that it is not just about the nuclear two-plus-one family but about single parents in particular, perhaps, to offer them hope of a route back into work and earning?

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

Mr Frew: Thank you. I thank the Member for his contribution. He is right to mention single parents. However, it is not about being a single person, because they will have a family. I fear for those single parents, as their families come under massive pressure. It is not just the single parent who struggles with childcare but the whole family. The Member is right that those things should be tailored to suit the most vulnerable in our society. I absolutely agree with him.

We have made strides in this regard. In September 2022, my colleague and the then Education Minister, Michelle McIlveen, announced the first steps towards that commitment, having instructed her officials to develop a timetable and a costed delivery plan to provide a minimum of 22 and a half hours. We know that that is not enough, but that was embedded in the psyche of the Department so that we would not go in reverse. It is critically important that we advance those arguments and policies.

I am so glad that this is the first day of real debate, and it is the first day that parties, namely Sinn Féin today, can choose a debate, and I am so glad that it has chosen this subject, so credit where credit is due. I am so glad that we have been able to debate the issues, but it is vital that the Executive work together to deliver this, because out of the policy will so much more flow that will help other sectors and Departments. The Department for the Economy, the Department for Infrastructure and all the places that are workforce-intensive will benefit if we get this right. It is not just about supporting the family but about supporting the infrastructure around the support for government that we need.

If we go about producing a Programme for Government, which we have not really talked about yet, we should see this embedded right through it so that every Department can carry the burden. As a Member of the Assembly, that is what I would like to see. I would like to see the Executive pick this up and support families in the way that they should. This Executive should not hurt families in the way they have over the past two years or over the two years before. Let us try to get policies that support families instead of hurting them. I look forward to that day.

That will all come at a cost, so it is vital that the Executive know the full cost. When the Minister

responds to the debate, perhaps he can say how much it will cost so that we can get it programmed into the Executive's psyche before anything else. There are other burdens and pressures, but this is one of the greatest burdens that our people face nowadays. It is not only about childcare. People with young families are trying to keep down a home and hold on to not one job but two jobs in many cases.

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

Mr Frew: It is vital that we listen and we act.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: This is Sorcha Eastwood's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, so I remind the House that it is the convention that a Member's first speech is made without interruption.

Ms Eastwood: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I acknowledge that this is my maiden speech, and I am humbled and privileged to take my place in the Chamber to serve the people of Lagan Valley. I also acknowledge my former colleague Trevor Lunn, who previously held this seat and served his constituents with distinction, and I pay my thanks to him. I also thank the Lagan Valley Alliance Association, without whom none of this would be possible, my family and, lastly, my husband, Dale.

Lagan Valley is my home, where my family has had its roots for hundreds of years and still lives on our small farm in Blaris, County Down, where my mum, Brigid, was born. It is a place that I love and will always love. Lisburn or Lios na gCearrbhachs means "Fort of the Gamblers", but gambling is what we have done too much of lately. We have been gambling with people's lives in high-stakes games of politics. We need to reform the institutions so that no one party can again hold us to ransom.

I was 12 when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, and my generation was promised the best. We were promised more than just the absence of violence: we were promised the economic and social benefits of peace. Peace comes dropping slow, as they say, but the economic and social policies that we need to allow this generation and the one behind to achieve their full potential are severely lacking.

However, I promise that my generation will not leave the hard work behind for the ones coming after. This generation will finish it and make good on what we were all promised.

3.15 pm

If a peace process takes 50 years, we are about halfway, and that is more than past time to move beyond what sometimes passes for politics here. Indeed, we can be quite good at it when this place and its people are not being used as leverage. The people cannot wait any more. We must stop exporting our best assets — our people — from these shores. Addressing the issue of childcare would be key to meeting that aim.

I believe that our best days are yet to come, and together we can create them. We are no longer painting in just monochrome but have a wide, varied and beautiful palette of colour. We must have that vision and belief to give people hope and a future, to convince them that we can make their lives better — not by just words but with deeds — and to rebuild trust and faith in these institutions.

Within a mile of my home in Lagan Valley, there are Egyptian societies, women's resource centres, Gaelic pitches, chess clubs, Orange halls, young farmers' clubs and an LGBT safe space club. That is the new Northern Ireland, the North, our home, your home. This land, this island, the home of saints and scholars, of Harry Ferguson and Jocelyn Bell Burnell, has punched well above its weight on the world stage. Despite all our challenges, we still have incredible inventors and makers. There are many more like them waiting to be discovered, but they either do not have adequate childcare or are bankrupting themselves to pay for it.

Our challenge is to create together the ecosystem, the society to allow those makers to flourish, not despite of us but because of us. Indeed, if the signature of this mandate can be anything, let it be empowering people, not simply holding them back. However, childcare is one issue holding many people back, particularly women. It takes a village, but the situation for many parents now is at breaking point. Even as I speak, families in Lagan Valley are reeling from the closure of a local childcare provider. Things are not tenable as they are, and we cannot let them slip further on our watch.

A progressive childcare policy is a key economic driver. We know that Northern Ireland has a low productivity rate and yet high economic inactivity. We know that many parents are being forced from working due to exorbitant childcare costs, and that is having a hugely adverse impact on our workforce. While we talk about empowering parents to fulfil their

ambitions, let us also talk about the childcare workforce. Childcare is a highly skilled profession and one that demands a lot more of society's respect. The childcare profession is full of people who want to develop, and we need to support them to do that. That is why Alliance believes that a key element of childcare policy should be the introduction of a clear skills and qualification framework.

This policy will require a significant investment, and we should not shy away from that. Quality care should require significant investment. Our children deserve that investment. While that will be costly, it will cost us more to do nothing. I support the motion and look forward to working with the whole House on these issues in the years to come.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you to all who have made a maiden speech today. It is not an easy thing to do in this House. This is one of the most worthwhile areas on which those maiden speeches could have been made.

I want to acknowledge, as vice chair of the all-party group on early education and childcare, the work that has gone into the debate and the many organisations that we have met. It is a testament to that that, on the first full day of Assembly business, we are debating this issue. I pay tribute to many from those organisations who are in the Public Gallery.

I think that we all agree in the House that there is a need for a long-term strategy for childcare in Northern Ireland. There have been many fine words in the Chamber today, and that is all to the good, but the harsh reality is that we will need a fully costed strategy for childcare. That will require mature cooperation across the Executive. It will require the Minister of Health, with regard to minimum standards. It will require the cooperation of the Minister of Finance to provide the means for it, and it will, of course, require the work and dedication of the Minister of Education to bring forward the strategy for the Executive. There is a huge challenge in that today.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. I hope that this is a useful intervention. One or perhaps two other Ministers could be included. We are talking about expanding employability opportunities, so the Minister for the Economy has a role to play, and, for those who are economically inactive, so does the Minister for Communities. I accept that it will be a costly solution in the longer term. In the short term, we can definitely do something about care for three-to-four-year-olds and, possibly, for two- to three-year-olds, but, for the longer-term

ambition, if we have full Executive proportionality, perhaps that is where we leverage the finances from.

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

Mrs Dodds: I absolutely agree with the Member. In citing Ministers, I do not mean to be exclusive but to demonstrate to the House that it is a matter for the whole Executive and not just for the Minister of Education. He will need the support of the whole Executive in bringing forward a strategy that is reasonable, feasible, fully costed and affordable.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dodds: If you allow me to progress just for a minute, I certainly will.

I will look at this in a couple of ways, the first of which concerns the intervention and sustainability that are required for the childcare sector. We have heard about childcare businesses that have had to close. We need a sector that is not always on the edge and teetering on the brink, as it has been in the past number of years. That will require not just sustainability but training and proper pay for staff. That is massively important as we go forward. It also requires us as a society to recognise that childcare, as the Member for South Belfast said, is not about babysitting. Childcare is about the development of our children. It is about looking after them in a setting where their potential can be reached. It is about support for families and the economy. Those are all really important issues, and, again, I am delighted that, in the House today, we have acknowledged the need for childcare provision for parents who have children with special educational needs.

My colleague from North Antrim referred to the fact that the previous Minister of Education looked at the DUP policy of trying to provide 30 hours of childcare for children aged three to four. We know that that is not enough and that we need to do more, but a strategy takes many years to put in place, and there are some quick wins that we can have within that strategy in the here and now. One of those is to try to get to a position in which 22.5 hours of education for three- to four-year-olds in Northern Ireland is guaranteed and we make up the 30 hours by some kind of voucher scheme for parents, who could perhaps use or save that as they wish. I am keen to hear the Minister's view on that.

We can also do much more in our schools. Wrap-around care in schools tends to be extremely variable across Northern Ireland, with places where there are schools that have five days a week of wrap-around care where children can go from eight o'clock in the morning until later on in the afternoon and places where there is zero provision. By investing in our schools, we can provide part of the solution to the problem.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. I realise that I have outrun my time, but this is a matter of huge importance, and I would like to hear some of the things that we can do that are quick wins in order to bring about solutions to the problem.

Ms Hunter: I congratulate you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, on your recent appointment. I also congratulate colleagues across the House on making their maiden speech. It is a nerve-racking and exciting time, I imagine, so congratulations to you all.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute today through the first speech that I have made in two years, and what better issue to begin with than affordable and accessible childcare and the need for a childcare strategy. It is a matter of immense importance to families and to the future prosperity of the place that we call home.

The current lack of affordable childcare has significant negative effects on families in my constituency. I express gratitude to those parents from across my constituency and to Melted Parents NI, who have shared their experiences by highlighting the mental and financial stress that is truly caused by the lack of an effective childcare strategy here. Without a comprehensive strategy, the cost to Northern Ireland is staggering, and we know that the average cost of full-time childcare for two children reaches nearly £25,000 per year. That is just undoable, and it forces so many into the space in which they are having the conversation about affording childcare or having a career, and no one — no woman — should be forced into that because of a lack of a strategy.

That dilemma remains a day and daily reality for parents in 2024, placing immense pressure on finances and families. In my constituency, I have witnessed at first hand the burden that it causes parents and childcare providers. I have seen how rising costs and overheads have

compelled providers, particularly those in rural areas, to increase fees. That puts providers in a difficult and, frankly, an unfair position. It also impacts their ability to recruit and retain staff. So many staff members really genuinely love working in the sector, and I echo the sentiments and statements from previous contributors about how childcare is so much more than babysitting. It is about the development of our young people, and, therefore, it is necessary that the strategy be put in place.

Of course, I cannot talk about the issue without referring to special educational needs. I know that the Minister will share my concerns regarding challenges in that area. In the past two years, I have spoken with so many parents with children who have special educational needs, and those parents have touched on the impact of a lack of support services. In my constituency, there is the Harpurs Hill Children and Family Centre. I spoke to parents and staff there about their role in those early years and about how they make the first intervention or, sometimes, how they are the first people who recognise that someone may have a special educational need and can advise parents about where they can find support and how to go about getting an assessment. It is about those young kids and those crucial skills; that is why those childcare providers are just so important. The children of today and tomorrow should not pay the price of the chronic underfunding that we have seen in our childcare facilities.

In previous years, we had the pandemic and the energy crisis, and we all know that those have only intensified challenges in this area. We know that unaffordable childcare impacts on parents, but, specifically, it has an impact on women, and that cannot be overstated. Thousands are forced to stay at home due to the rising childcare costs here, and that hinders their professional growth and limits their contributions to society. The economic setback for women goes far beyond finances, as it is a huge barrier to their potential.

I welcome the shared agreement today across the House. Although I am not a parent, I recognise wholeheartedly the impact that those costs have. As Mr Butler touched on, those rising costs and the pressure to put petrol in your car and pay your electricity bill really do all add up.

The SDLP tabled an amendment to the motion, which we hoped would result in us getting a report back from the Minister in the first 100 days, but, sadly, that amendment was not accepted. As we push forward, however, we want to see a childcare strategy that is shaped

for and by parents here in the North. The time for solutions is now, and we cannot let the lack of affordable childcare hinder the potential of our families and our economy any longer.

Miss McAllister: I will focus on a number of issues that some Members across the Chamber have raised, but I am very conscious that, as I do, I am reminded of when I started working at the Assembly in 2011. One of the first things that I heard in the Chamber was Chris Lyttle, who was an MLA at that time, ask the Minister of Education a question for oral answer on the childcare strategy.

It is really frustrating to think that, here we are, 13 years later, and we are no further on.

3.30 pm

I want to focus on issues around childcare, which starts at birth. The reason I say that it starts at birth is that we need to think about maternity, paternity and adoption leave provision. Many parents, after three months, move onto quite low incomes because they are on maternity, paternity or adoption leave, and then, when they go back into work, they are immediately thrust into high-priced childcare. It just does not stack up. Before you have even given birth or adopted, you are already thinking, "What am I going to do? Do I return to work or not?".

Let us face it: we are where we are because of the patriarchy. For hundreds of years, society has been designed for men going to work and women staying at home, but it is not like that any more. We know that families have changed, that more women are in the workplace and that families may consist of one mum and one dad, two dads or two mums. Families are all different, and that is why we need to implement a childcare strategy that suits the needs of every family and every child.

I want to speak a little about school-age children. When we speak about childcare, we often focus on the nought-to-four age group, but, actually, it is the school-age children who can sometimes be forgotten. I am conscious that, just before the debate, I was trying to sort out childcare for my two children. Day care closes at 6.00 pm, but the Assembly will potentially not rise until after 6.00 pm. Many parents across Northern Ireland, whether they are working in hospitals or schools, just do not have that flexibility of childcare. Then the grandparents come in. We all rely on our parents — our children's grandparents — to pick that up, but not everybody has that

flexibility and that support, and that is why it falls on us in the Assembly and the Minister to help those families.

Wrap-around care is key. There is a lot of talk, particularly from the DUP Benches, about focusing on that standardisation for three- to four-year-olds, but I want to be clear, as the sector has been clear: preschool provision is not childcare. We absolutely should standardise preschool hours, but we cannot expect parents to top up with vouchers for the extra to make it to 30 hours. What childcare setting will take a child for an extra hour one day and two hours another day? It simply does not work. We need that bespoke reality for Northern Ireland. I implore the Minister: while that might be a quick win, it will not work for the majority of parents. We need to standardise the preschool day, and we need to have childcare on top of that. We need to ensure that, no matter what we do going forward, it is fixed permanently. We may have delay in implementing this, but we want to get it right and make sure that whatever we do for parents means that more parents, especially women, can go back into the workforce and that, when their child turns four and is in school, they still have that childcare to rely on and do not have to think, "What do I do now?", and pay for after-school clubs, send them to swimming or football and rack up the costs there because it cannot be done anywhere else.

We need to think about it from birth up until the point where your child is allowed to and is able to stay at home alone, and we all know that it is different for every child. I implore the Minister to ensure that, when we implement the childcare strategy — I hope that we see it soon — we think about it in a holistic way.

Ms Nicholl: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with her points about taking a long-term view. Do you agree that the crisis is now and so, while we need a long-term strategy, we also need immediate interventions such as pushing for an increase in tax-free child credit, convening a task force and potentially creating a COVID-style payment that could support providers and offset the costs for parents?

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

Miss McAllister: Absolutely, I agree, and I thank my colleague for raising the issue. It would go a long way if the Assembly, behind the Minister of Education, called for a raise in the tax-free allowance. It goes some way in helping, but it is simply not enough.

I have said everything that, I think, needs to be said, particularly about ensuring that we have that proper bespoke childcare strategy here. Let us not dupe parents. Let us fix the system and ensure that we get it right from day 1.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: There is one more Member to speak. I am trying to get to everybody on the list who has requested to speak. It is time for you, Gerry. I just want to remind you that, if you take any interventions, you will not have extra time.

Mr Carroll: Thanks for that, Principal Deputy Speaker.

I thank the parents, guardians, childcare workers and campaigners — some of them are here today — who have forced the issue of unaffordable childcare onto Stormont's agenda after years of government inaction. It cannot be emphasised enough that childcare costs are too high. They were too high before Stormont's collapse and too high before the cost-of-living crisis. It is high time that politicians and the Executive did something about it. In socially deprived communities like mine that have suffered years of attacks from Stormont and Westminster, we have stagnant wages, welfare reform and service cuts, to name but a few. Childcare costs are pushing people to breaking point and to the brink.

There is no worse indictment of the current economic system than the fact that many working people are forced to pay for childcare. A commodity has been made of the nurture, care and development of future generations. The way that families pay out a huge bulk of their wages in childcare costs is shameful. Some providers can make a fortune doing something that should be a basic, publicly funded social necessity.

I agree with a lot that is in the motion and will support it. We need to tackle unaffordable childcare costs. Some of its content should cause further debate and teasing out. It is worth noting that some of the motion is written with economic growth and the market in mind, rather than having families front and centre. We need to move away from being fixated on seeing the issue of childcare as being solely or primarily about driving the local economy, rather than improving families' lives and improving overall living standards for everybody. Sometimes, the focus is overtly on getting people back to work, whether they want to go back to work or not. While it is true that many people want to return to work and should be afforded the opportunity to do so, many more are, in fact, forced to return to work just to pay bills.

The motion obviously does not acknowledge that the childcare provided by parents and guardians at home is, in fact, labour. It is, in fact, work, as some have referred to in their speeches. Raising children is an unpaid job, and it overwhelmingly falls on women to do it. Those who choose to do that job at home should be paid to do it. It is a difficult job, as people have mentioned.

That said, whilst we may differ in our reasoning in teasing out the issues, we believe that affordable childcare is a worthwhile and important aspiration and will support the motion, but we think that we can go further. We think that childcare, like healthcare or any other form of care, should be free at the point of service. There is enough wealth in society to provide universal free childcare that is paid for through progressive taxation. The conversation about childcare has to put our children's development, workers' welfare and families at its core and must remove the profit motive from its provision. The state must step in to support community-run, not-for-profit facilities in the crucial work that they do. The state must also plan for the provision of publicly owned childcare facilities where workers are given decent pay and terms to match the invaluable nature of their role. It is shocking that there is still no childcare or crèche facility in this Building, not just for MLAs but for all the staff who work in and around the Building who have children. It is absolutely shocking and beggars belief.

In a nutshell, we must take childcare provision out of the hands of wealthy private entities and ensure that we all, as a society, provide childcare for people, not profit.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister, you have 15 minutes to respond to the debate.

Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. I wish you well in your new duties.

I thank Assembly colleagues for tabling the motion for discussion. I also thank Members who contributed to the important debate, and I welcome the opportunity to respond. I pay tribute to the Members — I think there were five, if not six — who gave their maiden speeches. I have to say that you will very much add to the abilities in the Chamber. The content and the ability to articulate that message were mightily impressive. Forgive me for singling out my colleague Cheryl Brownlee for her contribution. I am delighted that she was able to come into the Assembly to represent East

Antrim. She is a worthy successor to our late good friend David Hilditch, to whom she rightly paid tribute. I associate myself with her remarks.

I assure the House that the development of an early learning and childcare strategy is a top priority for me as Education Minister. There is no time to waste. I will bring an initial paper on the issue to my Executive colleagues later this week. It is clear that we have much work to do, and I am determined to press ahead at pace. I turn to the current position and stress that this is about both early learning and childcare. The strategy will have dual aims: supporting child development and enabling parental employment. It is about giving children the best start in life and supporting working families. It is important that the work we do and the model we put in place is capable of achieving both.

I am aware that the cost of childcare puts immense strain on family finances and, in some cases, prevents parents, particularly women, from entering and remaining in the workforce and progressing in their careers after they have children. Rather than being a barrier, childcare should be a key enabler for parents to progress in the workplace and access training and development opportunities. While making childcare more affordable for working families is a core objective for me and the Executive, it will be the willingness of the Executive to fund it that will be the real test of commitment.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Minister of Education for giving way, and thank everybody for bringing and speaking on the motion. Will he agree that the Executive have been engaged in this for some time? Right Start was a strategic direction back in 2013 with 15 key actions. However, the big challenge that was faced was a collective pulling together to prioritise the resources and funds required. We know that this will require significant investment, but what I hear is that everyone recognises that, without investment by the Executive, this simply will not work; it will not be funded.

In addition to a well-funded, well-designed strategy, which is much needed, we need urgent actions. I am glad that this was on the Executive agenda for the first meeting last week. The Minister has indicated that we will have discussion with a paper this week. Will he confirm that urgent actions will also be required, and that he will bring some of those immediate actions to support parents in crisis at the minute and the childcare settings that are really struggling?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister does not have extra time.

Mr Givan: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. I concur with the deputy First Minister's remarks, and I am pleased that she and the First Minister outlined this as a priority. It was one of the five issues that were on the agenda for our first Executive meeting. I will bring a paper for discussion to Executive colleagues this Thursday. That will also touch on some of the issues that Members raised about departmental buy-in to the process. A number of Departments have been named in that. It is critical that that cross-departmental approach is taken forward in collaboration. I will lead on it, but it will need the buy-in of other Departments, and it will need the Executive as a whole to make it a key priority.

As well as considering affordability measures for working parents, I want to ensure that we support well-established and highly effective early years programmes such as Sure Start. Those interventions support children facing disadvantage, who are at the greatest risk of poor educational outcomes.

A Member: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Givan: Forgive me. I have a lot to get through. I will make some progress, and, if I have time, I will give way.

We will need a package of targeted measures aimed at addressing the various outcomes that we want to achieve and which Members have all raised. I am well aware of the challenges that many parts of the early learning and childcare sector face in terms of their sustainability and difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff. I look forward to meeting parents, early learning and childcare providers, with other stakeholders, over the coming weeks to hear at first hand what, they feel, needs to be done. Some Members mentioned an advisory group. A stakeholder engagement forum already exists, and that is something that I can look to in terms of expanding and repurposing as we move forward in delivering the childcare strategy.

Our first priority will be to stabilise and further develop the services as we seek to address issues of underinvestment. The work to date has involved extensive stakeholder engagement through the establishment of the stakeholder engagement forum and in individual stakeholder meetings. My officials have also had engagement with government officials across the United Kingdom and in the

Republic of Ireland to learn about their early learning and childcare schemes, what their objectives are, how they were developed and implemented and what outcomes they are delivering. While we can and should learn from others, it is important that we consider what would be best for Northern Ireland and deliver the outcomes that we want to achieve here. I am aware of the reported implementation issues in rolling out the 30-hour offer in England, and we want to learn from that.

However, at this stage, I do not want to rule out any options until I have had the opportunity to consider them in more detail and see whether there are elements of them that might translate into the Northern Ireland context.

3.45 pm

I want to deliver a bespoke and affordable scheme for Northern Ireland that addresses the challenges that we face and delivers the outcomes that we want to achieve. However, it must also align with the financial support that is already provided by the Government to assist with childcare costs, principally through universal credit and the tax-free childcare scheme. It is important not to displace those inadvertently.

I am aware that there have been calls to ask the Government to increase their contribution to the tax-free childcare scheme upwards of the current 20% contribution, and Miss McAllister and Ms Nicholl referred to that particular issue. I share the desire to see that contribution increased. Indeed, my party colleague and predecessor in post, Michelle McIlveen, wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer in September 2022, requesting an uplift in that contribution from 20% to 30% and the removal of the cap on the total amount that can be claimed by parents in any one year. Members of Parliament from Great Britain have made similar calls. So far, His Majesty's Treasury has not agreed to any increase. However, I intend to continue to pursue the matter as it would, undoubtedly, provide additional support for working families relatively quickly.

In advance of expansion, I fully recognise the need to stabilise existing core services and programmes in order to create a firm foundation for growth. There are already some well-established and high-quality government-funded early learning and childcare services to build on. Those include my Department's preschool education programme, Sure Start, the pathway fund and the Toybox project. I pay tribute to programmes such as Sure Start and

the pathway fund and those who deliver them. Studies consistently show that such early interventions improve children's cognitive abilities and social and emotional skills, leading to greater academic achievement. Those benefits have been shown to extend to wider society through improved health, lower crime rates and increased productivity. The staff who work in those programmes have a passion for what they do, and they make a real and lasting difference in the lives of many children and families. I pay tribute to them.

While funded preschool is universally available in Northern Ireland, the preschool offer varies between 12 and a half hours and 22 and a half hours per week for a 38-week slot in the year. Therefore, while the offer is universal, the session lengths are not. Approximately, just 40% of children currently receive 22 and a half hours, while 60% are receiving a minimum of 12 and a half hours. We need to address that inequity as a priority and begin to move to a position where all children receive twenty-two and a half hours per week. That would contribute to our child development and childcare objectives. It would also result in Northern Ireland having a higher level of universal provision for three- to four-year-olds than England, which we are often compared to. In England, three- to four-year-old children whose parents are not in employment only get 15 hours. Even so, 22 and a half hours is not the height of our ambition for working families with children of that age. We have a manifesto commitment to provide 30 hours, and that remains my objective.

Following significant engagement with the sector and findings from independent commission reviews, it is clear that there is a real and urgent need to protect our current provision and reinvest in areas that have been squeezed by rising costs and constrained funding. I want to do that as a matter of urgency. There are other issues to be addressed too, not least making sure that appropriate childcare is available and accessible for children with disabilities and special educational needs. It is also important that I consider the recommendations made by the expert panel in the 'A Fair Start' report and, more recently, the independent review of education on that issue.

We all agree that the current level of early learning and childcare support that is available to children and parents in Northern Ireland is inadequate and that there is a need for the Executive to address that. Implementing an ambitious programme of reform will take time, which is why I also want to consider what short-

term measures might be possible in order to ease current pressures. The budget that is needed for all of this will be significant and will require an ongoing commitment. If real and meaningful change is to happen, Executive colleagues must be willing to invest properly in early learning and childcare. Members have asked for associated costings. When fully implemented, however, the annual and recurring costs will potentially be up to £400 million. The ultimate scale of the budget required will be dependent on the scope of the strategy and the level of support agreed by the Executive across the range of areas proposed. Make no mistake, however, about my ambition for this strategy and my commitment to making the case for the funding required to deliver progress as a matter of urgency.

Member may ask, as I did, how the £400 million figure was arrived at. I am told that it is a relatively conservative estimate. Members, to standardise our preschool education placements so that all children get 22 and a half hours would cost £35 million. Actions to support Sure Start, the pathway fund and Toybox towards full expansion would cost £40 million. Actions to support sector sustainability, workforce development and children with additional needs would cost £50 million. Miss McAllister talked about a funding model to support affordability of childcare to go beyond three to four years of age. If that were applied from nine months old to age four, the estimated cost, based on 30 hours of funded childcare, would be £270 million. That gives us the total of £400 million. The figure has been arrived at through engaging with stakeholders, but it is also the Strategic Investment Board's assessment. Members, that figure is hugely significant, so I welcome the commitment from the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and all the political parties that this is a top priority for us to deliver. I will drive forward the childcare strategy, but, Members, be under no illusion as to the scale of the funding that will be needed to make it a reality. Of course, it will take time to have the childcare strategy fully developed and rolling out, but that is the quantum of resources that could be needed to deliver a fully costed childcare strategy.

I invite the House to support me with this, and I thank Members for their contribution to the discussion. I welcome further engagement with all concerned so that the benefits of a new early learning and childcare strategy are fully realised. I commend the motion to the House.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. This is my first opportunity to put on the record my condolences on the loss of

David Hilditch. B'fhear deas é. He was a lovely man. I sat on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure with him.

I call Mike Nesbitt to wind on the amendment. Mike, you have five minutes.

Mr Nesbitt: Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, thank you very much. I congratulate you and wish you well. I hope that you enjoy the view. I also congratulate all those who made their maiden speech: Cheryl Brownlee, Kate Nicholl, Danny Baker, Nick Mathison and Sorcha Eastwood. Thanks also to my colleague Mr Butler for tabling the amendment and to Mrs Mason, Miss Brogan, Mr Baker and Ms Kimmins for tabling the motion.

At this point, I am getting sick of being nice to people and am going to pick a fight. The fight that I choose to pick is with Mr Butler, who opened his remarks by bemoaning the fact that he and others have been at this for two years. I feel that I have been at this for over 12 years. I remind the House that, until May 2016, the issue fell within the remit of the then Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I chaired several meetings of the scrutiny Committee, and we tried to understand where the blockage was with bringing forward a strategy, not least because it had a budget line. From memory, there was £12 million for childcare that, for a long time, sat unspent. This is an opportunity to get it right this time, and I do believe that is not just about affordable childcare but about affordable and accessible childcare.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I want to highlight the point again that an Executive strategic direction called Bright Start was agreed by the Executive. Fifteen key actions were allocated against it. People seem to have forgotten that, but it was there. It is, I think, to the regret of everybody that that was not advanced to a full strategy, despite significant consultation, but there is an opportunity now to do that. I just wanted to clarify that point.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Mike, I am sorry, but you do not have an extra minute.

Mr Nesbitt: Regrets, I have had a few. *[Laughter.]* It has to be affordable, not £10,000-plus for each child, as Miss Brogan and others pointed out, but it also has to be accessible. There was another scheme that was about giving four hours a day to preschool children. The report claimed that it had been extremely successful, with a success rate of well over

90%, in offering families places. However, that included, for example, a family who came to see me in my office in Newtownards and had been offered a place in Suffolk in West Belfast. By the time they got there and back, they had about an hour and a half before it was time to go and collect the child. That was not a success in my view. I hope that, this time, we will go forward in the spirit of an outcome-based accountability Programme for Government. That is a results-based programme.

I am not sure whether any Member remembers Mark Friedman coming to this Building some years ago to talk about this results-based accountability scheme, which he is basically the father of. He wrote the book 'Trying Hard is Not Good Enough'. That is pertinent to what we do as a devolved Administration. We tend to say that we are working night and day on this problem, as if that is going to fix it. Working night and day does not guarantee success. We have to stop focusing on just the inputs and outputs of government. We have to focus on the outcomes. We are very good at the inputs: we are spending a lot of money and doing this and that. The outputs now are, for example, "1,000 people have attended awareness programmes. 10,000 people have responded to our consultation. We have set up a unit in the Department or an advisory group". None of that guarantees the sort of outcomes that we are looking for.

I commend the outcomes in the motion and the amendment: to prevent educational disadvantage; to support children with special educational needs; to promote emotional health and well-being amongst children; to improve terms and conditions for workers; to deliver accessible and affordable childcare. Those are the measures that this strategy, whenever it comes, should be measured against.

As the economy spokesperson, I say that one of the outcomes is about not just child development; it is about our shocking levels of economic inactivity. The motion talks about the positive impact on the economy of this strategy. A lot of people who are economically inactive want to be active, and one of the big barriers is the lack of affordable and accessible childcare. It is not just a matter for the Minister of Education. As Mrs Dodds conceded, encouraged by Mr Butler, it is potentially for the whole Executive. I can see a role for the Economy, Communities, Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and Justice Ministers.

I commend the motion and the proposed amendment from Mr Butler.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Liz Kimmins to conclude and make a winding-up speech. You have 10 minutes.

Ms Kimmins: Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle, I congratulate you on your new role. You have handled it very well today. I want to thank all the Members who have spoken today. It has been a really positive debate.

My party tabled the motion as childcare is a significant priority for us, but it is also safe to say, given the unanimous support across the Chamber, that it is a priority for all parties. The point has been well made on just how important early education and childcare are. There is strong evidence to show how crucial that window in a child's life is to their development. It is also a crucial opportunity to identify issues or difficulties that a child might have and is key to getting the right support in place at the earliest possible stage.

As a working parent, like many others have described, I am acutely aware of the huge challenges in accessing childcare, due to the lack of capacity, and the challenges that providers and those working across the sector face because those challenges continue to grow. That includes the rise in energy costs for self-employed childminders operating from their own homes and those in childcare facilities trying to pay their staff fairly in the context of competing pay, which is forcing them, as we have seen in the last week alone, to close their doors.

Highly qualified, experienced workers are being lost to other jobs with better pay and conditions, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract and maintain staff, as we have heard on countless occasions and even in this debate. We need to ensure that staff working across the sector are properly valued and respected for the excellent work that they do, which has an increasingly wide and complex range of responsibilities. It is no wonder that many of them are walking away from a job that they love, a job that is, it is fair to say, a vocation for many, to jobs that offer better pay and conditions but maybe do not give them the same satisfaction and value.

4.00 pm

As we have heard from many Members today, we cannot continue to push the rising costs on to already hard-pressed parents and families, and we need to put in place the right support to stop that cycle. Investment in a childcare

strategy that is co-designed with families, providers, trade unions and workers to fully address the challenges that they face will have far-reaching benefits across society. The huge cost of childcare for families is untenable for the vast majority of parents, and we need to work together to deliver on this critical issue. The provision of affordable childcare that is accessible to all — not just for those who can afford it and, as others mentioned, not just for those who have children of a certain age — will have a huge impact in boosting economic activity, particularly for women, which is important not only for our economy but for the well-being of parents who can get back into the workplace and an adult environment. I know from when my children were maybe nine months to a year that you cannot wait to get back into the workplace and have that balance in your life.

The strategy will also help, as we have discussed, the vast workforce challenges that we see across our key public services. In health, education and infrastructure, positions can be fulfilled predominantly by women, yet, largely, those are the people facing the barriers that we have talked about today. Many have talked about the significant cost, and the Minister referred to the cost of investment in childcare to date, but it is important to understand that, if we get this right, we have a real opportunity to transform society for the better. Whilst there will be initial costs, and those must not be understated, there will be benefits across every sector.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way, and I know that she will not have time added on.

I am glad that the Member raised that point, because I did not get a chance to address the Minister on it. I thank the Department for the work that it has done on the costings, but what has been missing all along is the fact that savings could well be made not just fiscally but in the improvement to children's lives. If we get the early identification of needs and early support in, guess what? Our ambition should be to reduce the burden on the special education budget, which is costing £0.5 billion at this point. I offer a challenge to the Minister to ensure that not just the cost but the savings are factored into those fiscal arrangements.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry. The Member does not have extra time, and interventions are meant to be brief.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Member for raising an important point, and we can look at that in every area of our work. If we can get it right at the earliest possible stage, we will see the benefits elsewhere. It is not all about cost; it will have far-reaching benefits and efficiencies that we will see further down the line.

I agree with Members who talked about childcare as a cross-cutting issue. From our perspective, we have heard how Ministers around the Executive table are all up for this, and it will require cross-departmental working. However, it is important to recognise and acknowledge that, as was unanimously agreed in the Chamber last Tuesday, we are chronically underfunded and the British Government have a role to play in ensuring that we have the proper funding to deliver what is needed. We need proper funding that will enable us to do what we have committed to do to deliver on the issue of childcare and early education. We need to continue to speak with one voice when lobbying the British Treasury on this, because, if we want to do this, we want to get it right and ensure that we are properly resourced to do so. Once we have the proper resources, we can do so much more, and we will be able to deliver properly for the people whom we serve.

I thank everyone who has spoken in support of the motion today. The motion has set an ambitious tone for the new Assembly, and key to that, as I said, is working together to deliver quality, affordable, accessible and sustainable childcare. I ask all parties to support the motion.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that the costs of childcare are unaffordable for many and that hard-working families are struggling every month to meet these costs; further recognises that the childcare sector is in need of urgent and significant investment in order to put the sector on a sustainable footing, to improve terms and conditions for workers and to deliver the high-quality and accessible provision that families and children deserve; notes that without affordable childcare provision many people, particularly women, are unable to take up or return to employment; agrees that affordable childcare would have a hugely positive impact on our local economy; acknowledges that high-quality childcare and

early years education can help to give children the best start in life, support children with special educational needs (SEN) to help prevent educational disadvantage and promote emotional health and well-being amongst children; calls on the Minister of Education to listen to the views of parents and businesses by way of a deliberate consultation; and further calls on the Executive to work collectively to deliver a strategy that makes high-quality childcare, affordable for all families, a priority.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the House to take its ease so that we can make changes at the top Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Planning System: Fundamental Appraisal

Mrs Erskine: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges the importance of the planning process towards growing the Northern Ireland economy and creating places that people want to work, live and invest in; expresses alarm at lengthy delays in determining major applications as well as the often disjointed and ineffective approach to taking forward major projects that have been approved; highlights the need to support thriving rural communities by opposing policies that further constrain development in the countryside; believes the planning process must have the needs of our ageing population and those living with disabilities embedded as first principles; notes that planning and design processes must enable delivery of key Programme for Government outcomes as well as promote green solutions; and calls on the Minister for Infrastructure to commission an urgent and fundamental appraisal of the planning system, including a review of the Strategic Investment Board and its functions.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs Erskine: As the Chair of the Assembly's new Infrastructure Committee, I fully expect the subject of the motion to be one of the bread-and-butter issues in the months ahead. At the outset, however, I make it clear that any comments that I make during the debate are

made solely in my capacity as DUP MLA for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, not as Committee Chair.

Like many colleagues in the Chamber, I first saw day-to-day planning concerns while I was a councillor on Fermanagh and Omagh District Council. You will appreciate that many of the issues related to rural matters and were very different to those that were seen by some of my urban colleagues in the Chamber. Many of the frustrations are the same, however, including length of time for applications and feedback etc.

We need a planning service that understands the needs of the countryside and its inhabitants. We face challenges with keeping young people in their home communities. Planning should be there to support that, not aid in driving them away. It is important that Ministers understand the challenges and the unique nature of rural villages and do not seek to bring into force dangerous and concerning legislation, such as was the case in 2021, with the planning advice note (PAN) on countryside development that Minister Mallon sought to introduce in 2021 and on which she later reneged.

I recognise that there is also clearly a need for balance between development and protecting our green spaces, which are one of our greatest assets. During the past two years, the previous DUP infrastructure spokesperson, Phillip Brett, engaged with stakeholders and worked on a policy paper regarding the planning system and the need for reform. When we talk about significant foreign direct investment coming into Northern Ireland alongside growing our indigenous SME base, we must think carefully about how planning can facilitate those critical outcomes. Too often, however, we are regaled with stories and complaints from stakeholders with a common theme: planning in Northern Ireland is not fit for purpose. That has been reflected in several reports: it must therefore be a priority for change.

I was shocked to read recently of the pressures that are faced in the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC), which I would have considered to be one of the key spokes in the planning wheel. It cannot be right that the PAC is forced to commit almost all its resources to a single case, meaning that many other significant projects are held back. I understand that many investors face internal competition to come to Northern Ireland, so the prospect of a long waiting list, should they need to avail themselves of the PAC, does not inspire confidence. I am aware that, between 1 January and 31 May 2023, only 3% of appeals

determined by the PAC were within its target timelines.

I want to work constructively with the PAC and others to understand its needs and how we can do things more effectively. Funding is key to unlocking some of the issues, and greater cross-departmental working is needed to solve them. Indeed, the role of the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) could be greater in ensuring that key strategic government projects are delivered in time and are not held up through planning delays.

Planning will also be key to achieving our net zero and decarbonisation ambitions in Northern Ireland, with the installation of renewable zero-carbon technologies and infrastructure. Are we yet in a place of having streamlined our planning approach to that? I am not sure that we are. Again, work will have to be done to ensure that all strands of government work together and deal with the real challenges, such as investment in our water and sewerage network. To have buildings that are future-proofed and that work for our communities, we must ensure that policies match the needs of our residents and investors.

Some of the ways in which planning could be reformed in Northern Ireland are streamlining the local development plan process and a more collaborative approach in the planning system between the public and private sectors to create better outcomes, which would create better transparency in the planning process. For example, there is concern that the interim Regional Planning Commission does not represent those who engage daily with the planning system. I ask the Minister to outline the commission's terms of reference and the work done to date. We must also ensure that those involved in planning are skilled to meet the demands and support them in that work.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Member for giving way, and I agree with much of what she has said. Does the Member agree that, for the public, openness and transparency are at the heart of this and that, to that end, any examples of predetermination in planning decisions from those elected onto planning committees need to be dealt with robustly?

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, transparency is at the heart of this, to ensure that people have access to all the information that they need in to fully come to decisions.

It is worth clarifying that, in the motion, we are not proposing yet another wholesale review of

the planning service. Reports such as the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report in February 2022 and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report have found that the current planning system is not working effectively. Instead, I urge the Minister to appraise the current situation in the planning service, identify the key needs and address them in the context of the many reports that have made clear recommendations. My colleagues on these Benches and I acknowledge the work undertaken to date by the Department for Infrastructure through its planning improvement programme.

While my remarks are made as a Fermanagh and South Tyrone MLA today, I look forward to working with my Committee colleagues, the Minister and officials to really make a difference in this area.

4.15 pm

Mr Boylan: I wish the Chair well in her new role and look forward to working with her. The Speaker will know, as he was Minister at the time, that the subject has been debated on numerous occasions, and I welcome the opportunity to speak on it. I also welcome the mover of the motion's remarks that we do not want to go back through another review. There have been a number of reviews, and there are things there that we can use.

The planning system plays a critical role in governance. At its heart, planning is integral to the delivery of a better society. It impacts on key issues such as housing, including social housing, affordable housing, supporting rural communities, facilitating business and helping to unlock the full potential of our local economies. It also impacts on our energy sector and our environment and is key to securing a just transition. What we need is an effective and efficient planning system, but, unfortunately, the planning system that we have is neither effective nor efficient and is not fit for purpose. It is something that all the reps hear on a daily basis, be it from constituents, the business community, developers or, indeed, across our rural communities.

Over the past few years, a number of reports have reviewed the planning system and the problems within it. An Audit Office report released in 2022 stated:

"Despite the importance of the planning system ... our review found that it is not operating effectively, not always providing the certainty that those involved wanted,

and in many aspects not delivering for the economy, communities or the environment."

In the same year, the Public Accounts Committee released a report that was equally critical of the system, stating:

"planning authorities have failed to deliver on many of their key targets, particularly on major and significant development ... Such poor performance has an impact on applicants, developers and communities and is risking investment"

here in the North. It is clear how important the planning system is and that much improvement is needed.

We have had many reviews and reports in recent memory, and many challenges to the system have been apparent for a very long time. One of the biggest issues is the delays to major developments. Both reports highlighted that, despite a statutory target for each council to process major development applications within an average 30 weeks, around one fifth of the applications took more than three years to process. Since those reports, the issues remain the same. In 2022-23, the average processing time for major applications was more than 57 weeks across all council areas. That was an increase on the previous year. I, like many, have engaged with many sectors on that point, and the slow processing times are a real headache for them, especially the green sector, which is a salient point as we need to transition to clean energy as soon as possible.

It is clear that slow processing times are one of the biggest issues in the system, with statutory consultees' responses being identified as a major problem. The PAC report also contained other recommendations. It highlighted the need for a suitable means of engaging with the planning system. There is a need to improve the quality of planning applications to avoid wasting valuable time and resources. The PAC also heard that there is:

"evidence that validation checklists will improve the quality of applications".

I recall that, as caretaker Minister, John O'Dowd launched a consultation on the introduction of validation checks, and I ask the Minister whether he is in a position to comment on that. My understanding is that those checklists would give applicants the clarity that they seek when lodging an application and could help with efficiencies in the system.

I just want to pick out a couple of points, because I see that my time is running out. One of the key elements identified in most of the reports and the chamber of commerce reports is the lack of funding right across the Departments, local authorities and the Planning Appeals Commission. If we are to do this right, that is one element that we definitely need to look at. I am running out of time. I support the motion. I look forward to working in Committee and coming up with some creative solutions, but I believe that funding is a major issue.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Mr Boylan, for keeping to your time. I call Mr Peter McReynolds. As this is Peter McReynolds's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House of the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr McReynolds: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Before I commence, I congratulate the Member on becoming Chair of the Infrastructure Committee. I look forward to working with her.

I take this opportunity to put on record my thanks to all staff in this Building who have made us all feel so welcome since the election in 2022 and the subsequent restoration of the Assembly. It truly is fantastic to see a buzz and energy about this place again, and I look forward to contributing to Assembly business in the Chamber. Before I begin the customary pleasantries, I would like to note that my parents are watching online. I think that it is the first time that they have ever done so, but I did not mention that it was a debate about planning legislation reform that I would be speaking in. *[Laughter.]* So, mum and dad, apologies for this.

I remember the first time that I visited Parliament Buildings, as a human rights law postgraduate, over a decade ago. If someone had told me then that I would one day have to give up my dream of living in and gallivanting around France on account of being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis but would then receive the honour of representing the people of Ormiston as their local councillor for five years, become a deputy lord mayor for the city I love and become an East Belfast MLA, I would have responded by asking whether they were feeling ok.

However, here I am, and I am honoured to have had the Alliance values that I share with my colleagues beside me and the work ethic, for which I think I am recognised by the people of East Belfast, acknowledged in the May 2022 election, and to now have the opportunity to build upon the hard work of my predecessor,

Chris Lyttle. Longer-standing Members will know that Chris served East Belfast for 12 years as its MLA, was well known for asking questions that few had thought of and was diligent in his approach to all aspects of public life. If I can hit even half the height that he ascended to — wow, I will be doing well.

Turning to the motion, planning reform must be high on the agenda of the Assembly, the returning Minister for Infrastructure and the Committee for Infrastructure. As someone who sits on that Committee, I look forward to delivering on the multiple recommendations and reports that have been written about what needs to be done over the past number of months and years. On that note, I extend my gratitude to the Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Chamber, the previous Public Accounts Committee, the Department for Infrastructure and RenewableNI. I am sure that many more conducted reviews or made recommendations on what changes are necessary.

We all know that our planning system needs to be addressed urgently to deliver on the potential that Northern Ireland has, and that it is linked to delivering improved standards of living through an improved economy, employment and opportunity for everyone. Key within that will be, first, balance, but also diligence. While we are content to support the motion and the principle behind it, we do not support the articulation of it in this motion. That is why we had tabled an amendment that would have addressed the inclusion of the Strategic Investment Board, which is the responsibility of the Executive Office and not accountable to DFI, and highlighted the essential role that planning improvement would play in addressing the climate emergency through addressing the significant gaps that are a barrier towards helping us to meet our net-zero targets.

Currently, our planning system is a key reason why 82% of renewable developers do not see Northern Ireland as an attractive place to invest. On average, it takes more than three years for a wind farm application to be determined, with data in July 2023 showing 125 applications for wind and solar farms as pending, the earliest of which was submitted in November 2012. As my predecessor would say, that is a farce. Moreover, reform and better resourcing of the Planning Appeals Commission will be essential in helping us to address an outrageous number of backlogged applications, which the proposer of the motion referred to in her speech. We hope that the outrageous number of backlogged applications plays a key role in any future reform of the planning system. These are highly important areas that are well known for

requiring attention. I am sure that we will hear a number of others during the debate, and I look forward to addressing them during the remainder of the mandate.

It is clear that the planning system needs to be reformed, but not at the expense of the environment or biodiversity. Accuracy and attention to detail are required if we are to overhaul this complicated but important system. I look forward to working on that as a matter of urgency.

Mr Stewart: I congratulate the Member on his maiden speech and also congratulate my colleague on her rise to Chair of the Infrastructure Committee — I look forward to working with her. I look forward to working with everyone who contributed today, including my East Antrim colleague Cheryl Brownlee. It was a very-well-done speech, so congratulations on that.

Undoubtedly, the planning system in Northern Ireland is not fit for purpose and is stunting economic growth, international investment and our green agenda, and reform is required. While I do not disagree with anything that has been said by the three Members who have contributed so far, I think that the motion, to combine some culinary jargon, is a mixture of word salad and mom and apple pie. The proposers seem to have thrown every planning buzzword into the motion in the hope that some of them will stick. I am sure that that was not the intention, and, hopefully, we will tease out some of it in the debate.

While there is much in the motion that no one could take umbrage at or disagree with, some aspects need to be teased out, particularly building in the countryside. The throwaway line about:

"opposing policies that further constrain development in the countryside"

needs to be examined closely in order to understand how it fits with subsequent lines about our green solutions and sustainability.

Mrs Erskine: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stewart: Yes, of course.

Mrs Erskine: During my contribution, I mentioned the PAN in 2021. I had extreme concerns with that. Will the Member acknowledge that it would have caused significant harm to the countryside? As I said in my speech, by setting that out, I intend to make

sure that we have a flexible approach, making sure that rural areas are protected in planning and not constrained by it.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Member for her intervention. Absolutely, flexibility is key. I do not think that anyone wants — this is what I seek clarity on — a free-for-all as in County Donegal, where we see examples of building endlessly into the countryside. No one wants that, particularly if we are going to protect our rural and farm areas and our diversity and natural habitats. In that respect, we are in agreement. For example, in recent months, much has been made of Lough Neagh. No one could overestimate the impact of the number of large dwellings that are built on B roads, with septic tanks that have overflows and water flows leading into them, and the impact that they could have if we further opened rural development in those areas.

Across Northern Ireland, the 11 district councils are producing their own development plans, and, in doing so, they have the power to produce their own bespoke policies for development in the countryside. That has the potential for mass inconsistencies across the country. Planning Policy Statement 21 (PPS 21) seemed to attract criticism from all quarters, but at least it was consistent across Northern Ireland in allowing for development in certain circumstances and was not a free-for-all. The issue is worthy of a separate motion and debate, but I caution Members not to use language loosely in a debate. It may get plaudits from planning consultants who design single dwellings in the countryside, but we need to factor in sustainability.

I query whether the Minister needs to commission yet another review of the planning system. There is no shortage of them. The Department for Infrastructure's report on its review of the implementation of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 was published on 27 January 2022. The Northern Ireland Audit Office published its review of the planning system on 1 February 2022. The Public Accounts Committee published a report in response to the Audit Office report in March 2022. This institution went into deep sleep for two years, and it would be constructive, before we start to call for more reports, if the new Minister could check with his officials and tell us what consideration his Department has given to the three reports that I have just mentioned. In addition, looking outside official government reports, the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce only last month produced a report

detailing its position on planning improvement and reform.

A lot of similar themes emerge in the reports and their recommendations. The Audit Office report is critical of the disjointed approach to planning in Northern Ireland. Its 12 recommendations relate to plan-making, improving performance on the most important applications, enforcement, delegation and committee matters, review of planning fees, leadership of the planning system, skills, and environmental ammonia levels. To focus on one issue for a moment, the Northern Ireland Audit Office report recommends greater transparency around council decision-making on planning, particularly the recording of why some applications that are normally delegated are referred to committee and the minuting of the reasons why the committee has overturned an officer recommendation. It also recommends appropriate training for councillors on planning committees, while the Department ensures regional consistency.

The PAC report also has 12 recommendations, and recommendation 5 emphasises that all those involved in decision-making should:

"ensure that processes are open and transparent, particularly where a high degree of interpretation has been exercised. The Department and councils should consider how checks on good record keeping, to ensure transparency, could be carried out effectively."

4.30 pm

When I went on to council in 2014, there was a programme from the then Department of the Environment in preparation for the devolvement of planning to councils. I remember, as part of that, observing a planning committee in Peterborough. I observed just how professionally its members went about their business. Subsequent to that, training has not been kept up to that standard. I have observed the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council planning committee in my constituency from time to time since then, and I have to say that, from a good start, standards have slipped.

It is not easy to fulfil a quasi-judicial role. Members of planning committees often lose large parts of their representative role and are meant to be strictly neutral, but I frequently observed councillors going straight from recommendations without proper questioning or debate, demonstrating predetermination, which is meant to be a cardinal sin. Councillors do not

always have to fulfil the recommendations, but, if they do, they —.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member resume his seat? The time has passed.

Mr Stewart: Thanks for the warning.

Mr Speaker: You were quite lucky there.

Mr Stewart: I appreciate that, Mr Speaker, and I appreciate the motion.

Mr Durkan: I join others in congratulating those who have made their maiden speech today. It is surreal to hear maiden speeches from colleagues from whom we heard so much over the air waves in the couple of years that this place was mothballed.

It is clear that our planning system is not working anywhere near to where it should be, and that has been outlined by all contributors today. I therefore understand the motivation behind the motion, but the motion — Mr Stewart referred to it more colourfully than I can — is maybe a wee bit muddled. It is fair to say that we all are or, at least, should be aware of the value of good planning; the need for planning to shape and create spaces for us to live and work in and to enjoy; the role of good planning in facilitating economic development while ensuring environmental protection; and the challenges that that can and does inevitably create for planners across our councils and in the Department. More often than not, it is the planners who bear the brunt of unhappy applicants, unhappy objectors and, even occasionally, unhappy politicians.

The system as it is is not just letting down people but letting down the planners. They are overstretched, under-resourced and under immense pressure. That is not to say that they do not get it wrong occasionally. I will not go so far as to say that.

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Certainly.

Mr McGrath: Does the Member agree that, in some areas, planners are under more pressure than in others, owing to the number of applications? There are not the same number of applications in each council area, yet, at the very beginning, when planning was devolved, each council area was given the same number of planning officers. Councils in border areas are having difficulty, because staff can get jobs

that involve less stress, less pressure and more money and are being drained away to work for councils in the South.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his intervention, I think.

Mr Stewart also referred to inconsistencies across councils, and different councils face different challenges. As the Minister who oversaw the transfer of the planning function from central government to councils, it is something in which I have a keen interest and about which I share concerns. At the time of the transfer, it was adequately resourced, but different things have cropped up in different council areas. There is a particular challenge in border areas. There is always the temptation for gamekeepers to be persuaded to turn poacher all across the area by a more lucrative private sector. That is why our planners need to be properly recognised and supported and why planning needs to be adequately resourced.

I value an appraisal of the planning system, but it has to go beyond the planners themselves. We need to look at statutory consultees, many of which, be they in DFI itself in development control or Roads, or be they in the NIEA or DFC's historic environment division, seem to struggle to get responses to applications in a timely fashion. There needs to be more accountability here, and perhaps a thorough and meaningful appraisal will assist in getting more support to those services in their respective Departments. Maybe it is time to explore mandatory consultation response times again, and that is something that, I am sure, I will revisit with the Minister.

The fault for delays does not always lie with the statutory agencies. It is often about the drip-drip exchange or the bat and ball of information between them and applicants, and I wonder whether an appraisal might point to the implementation of a checklist for applications so that they will not be accepted until they have all the ducks in a row. That will save officer time and applicant time and will save money in the long run. The introduction of the pre-application discussion (PAD) process was meant to do that, but, evidently, it is not working as envisaged.

The motion uses the term "disjointed and ineffective" to describe the approach to major projects. We have seen many projects delayed and delayed due to that, and that is why the SDLP brought forward a proposal for an infrastructure commission to oversee such projects. The Executive agreed to that in the last mandate, and TEO was to take it forward,

so I encourage the Minister and the Committee to take that up with that Department. TEO also has responsibility for SIB, so the fact that the motion calls on the Infrastructure Minister to review that board suggests that the motion itself is a wee bit disjointed.

There is mention of the process enabling Programme for Government (PFG) outcomes to be attained. We need an updated Programme for Government for a start, and the Climate Change Act 2022 will be central to that. Renewable energy projects will need to be prioritised, but that is not to say that they all have to be approved. Those applications cannot drag on for years and years causing anxiety for objectors as well as uncertainty for investors.

We acknowledge that the motion refers to the need to maintain and support thriving rural communities. I refer to a PAN brought forward by the previous Minister, Nichola Mallon, who was my colleague. I say to the Member that the PAN, which was panned, did not introduce anything new but just reminded us all what —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Durkan: — all parties had previously agreed to.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the matter, and, indeed, I thank my colleagues for tabling the motion today. It is great to see the cross-party support that is developing as the debate goes on.

Planning is such a crucial aspect of our economy, and an effective planning system is vital to instil confidence in the market for investment and economic prosperity. We need to see real change and transformation to develop our infrastructure through greater connectivity, investment in services and, indeed, a stable energy sector. There is no doubt that the current system is too slow, and, often, statistics for local applications, such as house extensions, can mask the real problem, which is that larger applications and major projects can face delays for many years.

A recent NI Audit Office report concluded that our planning system is not working efficiently and, in many aspects, is failing to deliver for our economy, communities or the environment; indeed, many other representative bodies share similar concerns and have carried out detailed reports on this important subject. While we recognise the work of the Department's

planning improvement programme to address some of the concerns, I believe that there is much more to do to improve our planning system and make it fit for purpose in 2024.

There is disparity across Northern Ireland in processing times for planning applications, and that is often frustrating for applicants and objectors — it is important to say that too — who look across at other council areas and see similar planning applications being progressed much more quickly. It is alarming that none of our 11 councils met the statutory target for making decisions on major applications during 2022. The average processing time for major applications is supposed to be 30 weeks, but, across all our councils, the average time taken during 2022 was over 57 weeks. Indeed, in Ards and North Down Borough Council, the average time was 104 weeks across its three major applications. We have 11 councils, 11 different systems and 11 different local development plans that are all at different stages of implementation. I know that a number of councils have not yet adopted their local development plans despite councils being solely responsible for planning for almost nine years.

While it is important that planning processes are agile to reflect the varied needs across Northern Ireland, there should be greater consistency in our planning system and across our councils. The Department should consider greater oversight of council performances and monitoring. Statutory consultation delays can lead to real frustration among applicants and investors and, in some cases, can be the difference between a project going ahead or having to be withdrawn due to time issues and ever-rising costs. We see that now more than ever, given the costs of inflation, construction and so on. Consultees play an important role in providing specialist views and advice in their respective areas of competency. The current 21-day target for consultee responses is just that: a target. If a statutory consultee exceeds the 21-day target to respond, there is no recourse or sanction. Stronger deadlines for statutory consultees are a must if we are to see real change and streamlining in our planning system.

The Planning Appeals Commission is also in need of attention to address the backlog, which has, for a number of years, been blamed on COVID. In the first five months of 2023 alone, the PAC completed only 3% of appeals within its target timelines. We need an improved, more efficient planning system in order to really stimulate economic growth. We need to give investors that much-needed confidence. We

also need to give our home-grown businesses confidence that they can carry out that expansion to their business or build that new factory, should they so desire.

There needs to be stronger engagement across industry. That includes businesses, business organisations, architects and, indeed, planning consultants. Planning reform needs to have strong and consistent input from architects and consultants, as they are at the coalface of the Northern Ireland planning system day and daily.

Our towns, villages and city centres are also changing, with hybrid working, the ever-increasing rise of online shopping and out-of-town retail centres bringing new challenges to our country. It is imperative that our planning system is agile and reflects the changing landscapes and needs across society in 2024. We need to see a greater level of town and city centre living going forward, particularly to meet the significant housing challenges that are faced across Northern Ireland from our capital city through to every rural corner of our great country.

I am happy to support the motion, and I thank my colleagues for tabling it.

Mr Speaker: As this is Patrick Brown's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House of the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Brown: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone for moving the motion. I congratulate her on her appointment as Chair of the Committee for Infrastructure, and I look forward to working with you on that Committee. I congratulate my colleague from East Belfast on his excellent maiden speech, and I congratulate in advance my colleague from Lagan Valley on what will, no doubt, be another excellent maiden speech.

I very much welcome the opportunity to debate this important issue during the first full week of Assembly business and to send a strong message that planning reform must be prioritised in this restored mandate. As my colleague from East Belfast clearly laid out, we have some reservations about the wording of the motion. With something as technical and complex as the rules and guidance governing our planning process in Northern Ireland, it is vital that we send the right message. Reform without clear and justified purpose will only take us backwards. The motion, perhaps, misses an opportunity to more comprehensively and concretely embed the climate emergency and

green economy within the topic of planning reform.

In my maiden speech, it is only right that I take a moment to reflect on the importance of the natural environment in my constituency of South Down and the role that the planning process can and must play in protecting and safeguarding it for generations to come. Growing up in the countryside between Crossgar and Downpatrick has given me a special appreciation of rural life. From Carlingford lough, up through the Mourne Mountains to the shores of the Lecale coast, we are uniquely blessed in South Down with outstanding natural beauty. It will come as no surprise that, as a Member of the Assembly, I will seek to do all that I can to champion and protect those environmental assets throughout my term.

I would like to take the opportunity to recognise the hard work and public service of former MLAs Sinéad Bradley and Emma Rogan, who represented South Down in the previous mandate, and, indeed, Jim Wells, who served the area since 1982. Jim and I disagreed on just about everything that you could think of, except the environment and animal welfare. We once found common cause campaigning to stop planning permission for an industrial-scale poultry farm outside Ballynahinch. I was a councillor at the time, and that application really demonstrated to me that the fundamental values underpinning our planning system are inherently flawed.

For example, it has always concerned me that animal welfare is not a material planning concern, given the minimal protections that there are against industrial factory farming or large-scale puppy farming.

4.45 pm

In any reform, we must ensure that the planning system does not become further estranged from the public good. Planning policy must contain the incentives that are required to help us build a better society. That means not only growing our economy but addressing homelessness through aiding the delivery of high-quality social and affordable housing by, for example, reforming PPS 21 and ensuring that local development plans are finally delivered.

We must ensure that the climate emergency is deeply and intrinsically embedded in planning policy and local development plans. Far too often, constituents of mine who are seeking to

install renewable energy, particularly farmers seeking to diversify their income, have run afoul of an overly conservative interpretation of planning policy that would deny wind turbines or photovoltaic (PV) panel installations on the grounds of visual impact in the countryside, not perhaps realising that, unless we make the microgeneration of renewable energy more accessible, there will be no countryside left to enjoy. We can begin by exploring permitted development rights for certain small-scale renewable installations and amending policy in order to ensure that renewable applications are streamlined through the planning process.

Enhancing trust and transparency in the planning process is also crucial. We need to look at the Planning Appeals Committee, include it in any reforms and ensure that there is a fair and open objection process that can help to balance the asymmetries that often exist between individuals and institutions. We must consider the departmental call-in process and ensure that it is transparent and efficient and that it does not unreasonably delay regionally significant applications, which are so often key drivers of our economy.

Despite some reservations on the wording of the motion on the protection of our countryside and on the enhancement of and support for renewable energy, we are content to support it, and I look forward to working with the Minister and other Members to see positive and progressive reform of the planning system in this mandate.

Mr Buckley: If there has ever been an issue that has caused me great frustration in this place, it is planning. It is a matter for which I have enjoyed much cross-party support when tackling the issues of the day, whether that support is from a former Minister or in general in the Committee.

Planning is the thread that knits together so many vital aspects of our civilisation. It enables our economy to flourish, raises the cranes and builds the workforce. It enables modern, fit-for-purpose infrastructure and connectivity. It allows local communities to reach their true potential, and it facilitates community cohesion. It enables those in government to stand up and meet their targets, although, if we are all being honest, sadly, the Northern Ireland planning system has failed by all accounts. Rather than being an enabler and facilitator, it has been an anchor on investment and a drag on long-term development. It is high time that we were honest about that. Do not take just my view for it — I see that some Members are disgruntled already — that is the view of the Audit Office

and the Public Accounts Committee. The system is in failure. The red light was flashing long ago. We have reports that stack that up. We have endless recommendations about what can be done to improve the system, but delivery has not happened.

Let us look at the Audit Office report. It noted "significant silo working" in the system when it was trying to meet many of its main targets. Three quarters of regionally significant and major applications were not completed inside the 30-week target. Fifty per cent took more than one year to progress, and 19% took more than three years. I dare say that the 19% represent probably some life-changing applications that could really build the workforce and progress Northern Ireland.

Let us look at our two-tier approach through local development plans. The Audit Office report notes that those plans were meant to be delivered and were expected following the transfer of powers within three and a half years. It is some eight years on, and we are starting to see some only now, with many still to come, albeit with the expectation that they will not be delivered before 2028. That is abject failure, and it is time that responsibility was taken for that.

I am not here to lambast the current Minister. It is not an easy job, and planning will not be an easy or quick fix. However, the reality is clear: if we do not get to grips with it very soon, we may as well mount a billboard in Shaftesbury Square that says, "Northern Ireland is closed to investment as its planning system continues to fail to deliver".

As for the renewable targets for 2030, there is not a chance. Let us look at the record. To date, the Planning Appeals Commission is taking over a year to progress a hearing for individual applications.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned the Planning Appeals Commission, but his party's motion does not. Does he agree that any appraisal of the planning system should also encompass the PAC, which falls under DOJ?

Mr Buckley: Absolutely. That is what a fundamental appraisal should look like.

Let us look at some of the detail to date. The report that was commissioned by the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce highlighted that the PAC has the ability to appoint independent investigators to help with the backlog. That may not apply to bulk applications but certainly,

where individual applications have the ability to change, we can make progress on those issues.

It is not all about criticism. Where is the potential room for improvement? On consultee response times, we are sick, sore and tired of the old chestnut of consultees running the clock out as far as they can go and, a day before the deadline, submitting for further information. That has happened continually. How do we sort out that issue? Let us look at presumed consent. If consultees fail to offer legitimate planning reasons for delays in response, let us put the onus back on the Department to say, "If you have not completed in time, we will give presumed consent". Let us look at areas in which we can go further than that and, perhaps, introduce penalties for late delivery by the Department. It is evident that there is a disjointed and silo mentality. If anybody wants to look back through the research pack, they will see that we dealt with that issue continually at Committee level. There is a disjointed approach from departmental officials when it comes to planning.

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Member for giving way. I mentioned the Strategic Investment Board and, indeed, other Members have mentioned that, in fact, it is under the Executive Office, which I know. That also points to the fact that there needs to be a cross-departmental element to looking at planning.

Mr Buckley: That is an absolutely vital point. Do you know something? One thing that I have become acquainted with in the Committee — I think that the Member will find this — is that we have constant dithering and delay from a departmental perspective. Regionally significant applications have been around for five-plus years, maybe more. Information becomes apparent and the Minister changes the decision. It is time that we put planning at the heart of our decision-making.

Mr Speaker: The Member should draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Buckley: I encourage the Minister to take that approach.

Mr Elliott: Planning is always an emotive issue. Sometimes, there is even an east versus west or a rural versus urban element. We hear all of this all of the time. We have heard a lot of criticism of planning officers and Planning NI, but let us look at the opposite side as well. Sometimes, the statutory consultees are extremely slow to respond and hold planning

applications up significantly. Look at the agents who put in the applications: let us not let them away without some criticism. All those applications are supposed to be front-loaded now. Are they all front-loaded? Some of them are. We have some really good agents who do that, but some agents do not. The planning officers, to be fair to them, go out of their way sometimes to try to get that information in. They need that information in order to be able to make a reasoned decision or, at least, form an opinion.

Let us look at the second point that I was going to raise around the Planning Appeals Commission. That body is part of the Department of Justice — or, at least, that Department is paying for it. Nevertheless, I understand that, within the past five years, planning appeals decisions have doubled, or somewhere in that region. Mr Buckley said that some planning appeals are taking over a year now: that is right. I think that the average is over a year for those that are oral hearings. I would have thought that, when it gets to the PAC, most of the information should be there. I am not sure what they are actually waiting on. While I am not hugely critical, I just want to know why. We need to know why before we can address the fundamental situation.

The third aspect is around local development plans. The proposer of the motion will understand this. Fermanagh and Omagh District Council has its local development plan, but what has it done? It has created chaos among the development zones that are already in towns and villages, because those development zones are from the old area plan. They are still development zones, but now they have this white land that you cannot automatically get development approval for. It seems crazy that that land is still within the development zone, but you cannot get development approval for it. I think that it was unwise to bring forward those new area plans without having the development zones resolved. I think that they have put the cart before the horse on this occasion, if you know what that means, Mr Speaker. I am sure that you do. There is a huge amount of work to be done. To the councils that have not brought forward their development plans, I say to them now to please be mindful of the difficulty that we have run into in Fermanagh and Omagh and try to resolve that. You should learn from other people's mistakes.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. That is an important point, but will he accept that, while we have stagnation in the coming forward of local development plans, we also

have stagnation in place-shaping, with some councils operating off local development and area plans that are 20- and 30-plus years old?

Mr Elliott: I totally accept that, but I still do not know why it has taken them so long. Nobody can explain to me why it has taken them so long. The new councils have been in place for eight, nine or 10 years, and they still have not made that initial progress.

My final point is on the agri-food business, which is mainly in rural areas. I have to say that there has been huge controversy over recent years about the designated sites and what you can put in place. It has got to the stage where significant agricultural developments are almost impossible to get planning approval for. That is not helpful for the economy, and it is not helpful for our agri-food businesses in Northern Ireland. I accept that there are issues around Lough Neagh and other pollution areas, but let us not always blame the farmer for this. It is not always their fault. There are many, many other issues, and we will probably hear a lot about that in tomorrow's debate. I ask that there be a reconsideration of the issue about the ammonia figures, and let us hear the justification as to why. It is stifling our agri-food industry, and, in some areas, it is going to ruin it. The other point on that is that it is actually going to make it worse, because some of those agri-food developments will actually improve the situation and reduce the emissions and pollutants coming from it, but they will not be allowed to do it because they cannot get planning approval for it. They are going to work within an old system and an old housing structure that is going to allow more emissions, whereas they could get a new development that would reduce those emissions greatly.

Mr Speaker: As this is David Honeyford's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House of the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Honeyford: Thank you, Mr Speaker. First, congratulations. This is my first time speaking since you have taken your new role, and I wish you well in it.

I want to start with a sincere thanks to everybody in Lagan Valley who put their trust in me and my party colleague Sorcha Eastwood. We are both committed to working every day for everyone across Lagan Valley. I moved to Lisburn at the age of 13, when my dad, a Presbyterian minister, was posted just outside the city at Magheragall. I met my wife Elaine in that small country church, and we have lived

and raised our family around the area ever since.

Lagan Valley is an increasingly diverse constituency, and that change is fantastic to be a part of. To help lead change and to push for better is the reason that I am here. I like to think that I represent a Northern Ireland where we no longer need to be constrained by the traditional fault lines.

I have gone from being a teenager in a manse to a development officer in a GAA club. I try to live out what is a truly shared society, a society that I want to see.

5.00 pm

I want to pay tribute to my predecessor, Pat Catney. It is not difficult to pay tribute to Pat. When I was first elected, my first comments were to say that I was sorry that it was Pat who was missing out. He is one of life's really good guys, and I wish him well. I know that he will do a first-class job representing Lisburn North in Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council.

On the motion, our planning system needs to be reformed to assist our economic growth, our rural applications and growth in renewables, as has been said. Those are just a few of the issues around planning. The process needs to be reformed to bring applications to a conclusion much more quickly and it must be much less onerous on applicants. We support the principle behind the motion, although I have reservations about some of the details in it. I will state these but will not force a Division on it.

As we know, PPS 21 sets out planning policy for the countryside. However, although I agree with the principle of planning reform, I cannot agree with the motion in its entirety. The Alliance Party's relatively straightforward amendment to the line, "by opposing policies that further constrain development in the countryside" was not accepted. I accept that, but how can you call for a fundamental appraisal of a system if your starting point is to oppose any change that it will bring? I acknowledge that the proposer of the motion said in her speech what she meant, but we have to go by the words in the motion. PPS 21 made the process based on the principle of development for farmers much simpler, and that is overall a good thing and important to our farming community. A large part of Lagan Valley, which I represent, is in that community. It makes it easier for the next generation to stay in the rural community, to live on the land that they farm.

In my office, I deal with a huge number of planning applications for constituents in Lagan Valley, from major business applications to rural countryside dwellings. A large number of those have been caught up in the countryside infill change in the conditions of COU8 in the adoption of Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council's local development plan. We heard from a Member about a similar issue in Fermanagh. Therefore, as a Member for Lagan Valley, I am well aware that public trust in our planning system has been damaged over the past number of years. Substantial legal bills have had to be paid by the local ratepayers.

I need to put on record that, in my view, the wording of PPS 21, and CTY8 within it, has been stretched and misinterpreted, where tree houses, domestic garages and garden sheds have been used as buildings to apply for infill permissions. We have seen a string of judicial reviews against this policy in my area, and that has led to vast expense and frustration. Unfortunately, lots of innocent people have been caught up in this. It has caused considerable anxiety and the planning system has been delayed dramatically. That is an obvious reason why reform of that policy has been required for some time to clear up any ambiguity.

As reform is introduced, the motion does not provide enough detail to address the hurt and real-life issues that ordinary people are suffering right now in my constituency. Instead, the immediate help would be that, during the approval of local development plans, consideration would be given to allowing an actual grace period to allow for applications that are already in the system, some for many years, to be dealt with.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Honeyford: I will finish there. Cheers.

Ms Armstrong: The joy in coming in so late in a debate means that a lot of what you had planned to say has already been said. I just want to reiterate a few things. Thanks, of course to all those who made their maiden speech. I was a lot more cowardly than you, as I have already said, in that I made my maiden speech during a debate on legislation so that I did not have to worry about the time. Well done to all, and to the new Chair of the Committee for Infrastructure, Mrs Erskine, thank you for bringing this motion forward.

Like other Members, I am concerned about some of the wording. As a rural dweller, I do not want a free-for-all in building in my community. However, I agree that there has to be some sort of reform that allows for things like wind turbines, solar panels and heat pumps, which I see being turned down on a regular basis for goodness' sake, in rural areas. I am very lucky to be a coastal dweller, and I want to see more offshore and tidal options for energy being brought on board.

Coming back to the motion, while the Minister is in the House, I want to talk very quickly about major developments. I have a concern about major developments, and this is in the Minister's remit. Previously, a decision was taken by the Department not to call in a major development, namely an aquarium that was going to be built in the Titanic area of Belfast. Why would that concern me? I live in Strangford, and the Ards peninsula has the Northern Ireland Aquarium, now known as Exploris. The decision was taken that it was not contrary to the regional planning strategy, Planning Policy Statement 16 (PPS16), as the proposal did not safeguard a tourism asset and did not damage rural tourism. That aquarium has never come forward: 2021 and 2022 have passed, and that aquarium still has not been built. The Northern Ireland Aquarium or Exploris is still in place. If that aquarium is built, you may as well wipe out tourism on the Ards peninsula because the four-year closure of the aquarium by Ards and North Down Borough Council had a massive impact, but that was not taken into consideration. As an outcome of today's debate on the motion, Minister, I ask that you look at the major development rules, especially with regard to rural areas and seriously consider any negative impacts.

As others have said, there needs to be reform of the planning system. I am not going to kick all the planners out there because many of us have colleagues who are councillors and sit on planning committees. They do what they can with the tools that they are provided with. It is quite simple: the tools are not good enough. Statutory consultees are my bugbear with anything to do with planning. I believe, as was said by the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, that mandatory time frames for responses should be brought forward, and that if those statutory consultees — perhaps, Minister, you will consider this — do not respond by a certain date or within x number of weeks, it is presumed that they have given approval, and the responsibility lies with them and not with the Department. I would like to see something done about statutory consultees.

Others have mentioned local development plans. Honestly. On 1 April 2015, this place handed over planning to our council colleagues, and they have worked so hard. However, since 1 April 2015, two local development plans have been introduced in Northern Ireland. Why is it taking so long? I seriously ask that the Minister considers putting a time limit on them. Our rural and urban communities deserve to see those plans.

There is another issue. The motion mentions the Programme for Government, and I remind all in the House that, in 'New Decade, New Approach', we agreed to a housing outcome in the next Programme for Government. That has not been put into play, and I have seen no system that outlines what that housing outcome will be. I imagine that it will be for the Communities Minister to take forward. However, without that housing outcome, what are we going to say in the Programme for Government when it comes to building? Not everything is about housing, but I sit on the Committee for Communities, and housing is a big part of what I am interested in. When I look at the issues for housing when it comes to planning, I see delays and no prioritisation for social housing. We do not even have targets through the local development plans or in local council areas for social planning. When the motion talks about older people and people with disabilities, as it should, we should add the need for social housing across Northern Ireland. With over 45,500 people in Northern Ireland languishing on the Housing Executive's waiting list, it is beyond time that we have more money pumped into housing to enable housing planning to come forward a lot quicker.

Housing, building and all those wonderful things that are impacted on by planning do have an economic impact across our communities. There is an economic protection role to play. If we look at economic development, and I am thinking about colleagues on the Committee for the Economy and the Minister for the Economy, I am watching construction workers —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Armstrong: — leave Northern Ireland. Minister, can you help with that?

Mr Speaker: I have only one Member left to speak, and I will introduce a grace period to allow that to happen.

Mr Allister: In or about 10 years ago, the House exalted in the fact that it had devolved

planning to local councils. I have to ask this: how did that work out? I must say that it has been a great disappointment. My experience, and that of many of my constituents, is that it has introduced chronic disparity into planning across Northern Ireland.

Take my constituency of North Antrim. The lower part of the constituency is under Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, and, because it has a new area plan, a gap site is now one building. In the upper part of my constituency, a gap site is two buildings. I regularly meet planning agents who tell me, "I am having trouble with this application. If I had made this application in Mid Ulster, it would have been through long ago". The devolution of planning has therefore brought about that chronic disparity, which is pleasing very few.

The great burden of what I want to say is about the farming community, however. Our farming community, particularly our poultry industry, is being crucified by an overzealous ammonia policy. That has become worse with the Department's move away from its consultation in December to make it even more extreme. I could cite multiple cases. In one case, a constituent of mine has been waiting for approval for a new broiler house for six and a half years. There has been ping-ponging between the Shared Environmental Service (SES), the NIEA and Planning NI. They seem to take great delight in frustrating the application and never reaching a decision, giving no thought to the fact that the motivation behind the application is that a second generation wants to join the farming enterprise and can do that only if planning permission is got. No regard is shown for their livelihood or anything else. The manner in which the ammonia direction is being abused to penalise planning applicants is beyond a disgrace.

I will give Members another case, concerning a farmer who is both a dairy farmer and a poultry farmer. He wants to upgrade his houses on the poultry side and needs planning permission to do so. He is willing to offer a reduction in his dairy herd in mitigation so that he can get extra on the poultry side, but a silo mentality leads the planning department to say, "We're not interested in whether you diminish your dairy side. We are interested only in the fact that you are going to increase your poultry side". Where is the logic in the supposed mitigation policy that applies to ammonia? It is not there.

I find that to be very frustrating for so many of our farmers, particularly in North Antrim, where we have these precious bogs, about which the incoming Agriculture Minister will no doubt be

more excited than he will about helping farming. If you are within 7.5 km of one of those bogs, dear help you: you will have no chance of even modestly increasing your farming enterprise, even though you are moving to better housing with fewer emissions than you currently have.

I gave the example of the dairy farm and the poultry house. In that case, because of the layout of the farmyard, the farmer could increase his dairy herd through permitted development — asking no one — therefore increasing his emissions. When, however, he comes along and asks, "Can I please mitigate the increase in the poultry side through a reduction on the dairy side?", the response is, "No. We're not interested".

Unless and until those issues are addressed, farming will continue to be crucified by an insensitive, inflexible, overzealous agenda in the planning sector.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure):

Before I start, I declare an interest in the debate. Councillor Mary O'Dowd, who sits on Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council's planning committee, is also my wife.

I thank all the Members who spoke in the debate about the planning system for providing me with an early opportunity to address the wider Assembly about very important issues. I am delighted to have taken up the post of Infrastructure Minister and to have the opportunity to make a real difference and a positive change to people's lives.

I congratulate Mrs Erskine on her appointment as Chair of the Infrastructure Committee and John Stewart on his appointment as its Deputy Chair. I look forward to working with them and the other Committee members in a positive manner on this and many other issues.

As many have stated, planning has an important role to play in making the North a better place for us all. It is a key enabler for promoting economic growth. It helps us create attractive places and to protect and enhance our environment.

The planning system can have an impact on all our communities, young or old, urban or rural. That is why it is important that we work together to deliver an efficient and effective planning system.

5.15 pm

On Mrs Erskine's point on rural planning, it may comfort her a bit to know that I was born and reared in a rural community. That may alarm others who have different views on how to proceed with building in rural communities, but that shows the context of our planning system.

Under the review of public administration, the Executive agreed to transfer significant planning functions to local government. That allows local communities to hold their councillors accountable for how they discharge their planning functions. Mr Allister gave an example of how, because of that decision, there can be one decision in mid-Ulster and another one at the Antrim end of that council: that is local democracy, that is the devolution of those powers to local government. It is up to local people to respond according to how they feel about those matters.

When Members talk about planners, it is interesting to ask who we are talking about. Are we talking about planning officials in the council, about our colleagues who sit on planning committees, about the officials who work in my Department as planners or about me as a planner, in the sense of being the person who has to sign off on planning applications? Our planning system and how we deliver it is multifaceted. That exposes the responsibilities that we all have to improve our planning.

Mr Durkan referred to the resourcing of planning at council level. He said that it was properly resourced when he transferred it, and I am not in a position to argue with him: if he says it was, it was. Our councils have just set their rates: how many of them increased their investment in their planning department? I do not know the answer to that question, but, if we want to improve planning, we will have to improve investment in councils, and I will have to improve investment in the Department. We will need resources to do so.

Even in terms of statutory consultees, our planning system is driven largely by people. Yes, we have to look for investment in new technologies — the planning portal is beginning to show its benefits, although there are teething problems with all technology when it is introduced — but look at statutory consultees. I will use the Roads Service and the Rivers Agency in my Department as examples. Both are understaffed, so how can we expect them to respond in a timely fashion to the multitude of planning applications coming through? We need to invest in staffing numbers and move them up.

That brings me to the point raised by a number of Members about whether we should introduce penalties if consultees do not respond in time. That would be self-defeating. Should we move ahead with a planning application if a statutory consultee has not responded? There could be a significant danger in that, because, if we get it wrong, it could go spectacularly wrong, especially in relation to the environment. Those things need to be thought through.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he agree that he has witnessed the gaming of the system by many statutory consultees who wait out their time period and come in at the last minute with a request for further information, stymieing the system? How will the Department and the Minister address those key concerns?

Mr O'Dowd: I am not sure that I would describe it in that way. As I said, I can refer to my Department as the statutory consultees for whom I am responsible. They do not have the resources or the people to meet the demand. I have a responsibility to make sure that they are properly resourced, and that is one of the tasks that I will take on. When we have properly resourced institutions, we can go back to the conversation about what happens if a deadline is missed — Does the plan go ahead? Do you introduce penalties? — but we have to get the resourcing right first.

While my Department has an important leadership role in the two-tier planning system, it does not act alone or have direct responsibility for addressing all the issues highlighted in the motion or by Members. This is a collective issue on which we must work together. I am clear that an effective and efficient planning system is key to growing our economy, protecting our environment, addressing the climate change challenge and ultimately creating successful places where people want to live, work and play and that meet all their needs for generations to come.

As has been noted, there have been many reports on our planning system, each with its views on what works well, what may not work so well and where improvements can be made. Members noted the Audit Office report on the planning system and referred to a report by the Public Accounts Committee from March 2022 that identified areas for improvement and change in the planning system. Since those publications, good work has been done by my Department, working in collaboration — this is important — with local government and other stakeholders to address the recommendations in both reports.

A planning improvement work programme has been established and is being taken forward jointly by local and central government. The programme is broken down across key themes, including policy and legislation; local development plans; development management; performance engagement; and financial sustainability of the system.

In an area where we need improvement, there is what some refer to as "the MOT theory": you put in an application and see how it goes, in the same way as some people put their car in for an MOT and see how it goes. Some people tell me that they cannot get their car in for an MOT, but that is a debate for another day. No doubt, you will have me back on that one. When I was in the post previously, I commissioned work on a validation checklist. Work is at an advanced stage on that. Like any legislation that we bring forward, we have to make sure that we have got it right. We are engaging with partners on it. We are engaging with the Planning Appeals Commission on an appeals mechanism, but, surely, in this day and age, planning agents, architects and others know exactly what is needed when submitting a planning application. If you submit a planning application with the required information, the Department can deal with it more quickly, and the statutory consultees can deal with it more quickly. While I will pursue the validation checklist, which is at an advanced stage, it is disappointing that we require legislation to cover it, but what has to be has to be.

We will continue to work together to address the challenges, whether that be with local government, statutory consultees or the Planning Appeals Commission, which, as you will understand, falls under the Department of Justice. It is wholly independent but sponsored by the Department of Justice.

We could use independent commissioners, as has been pointed out in the debate and by other bodies, but it is an expensive route to go down, and, at the moment, I do not have that option. I would much prefer to engage with the Department of Justice and see how we can support the Planning Appeals Commission rather than going down the road of appointing independent commissioners, but we have to keep that under review.

The delivery of major capital projects by the public sector has long been a source of comment by many. There has been some improvement. I accept that one swallow does not make a summer. The most recently published statistics, for the first six months of

2023-24, show that the average processing time for local applications was 19.2 weeks across all councils, against a target of 15 weeks, with four of the 11 councils meeting the 15-week target. For major applications during that period, it was 34.7 weeks across all councils. That represents a decrease of more than 15 weeks compared with the same period a year earlier, moving closer to the 30-week target. Results for the target of 70% for the closure of enforcement cases within 39 weeks are not available at this time. Once that information becomes available, I will make it available to the Committee and whoever else requires it.

There has been progress, and, although I accept that it was measured over only one year, with the various reports that we have had, the recommendations therein and the stop-start implementation of those at a political leadership level, we are having some change in the right direction, although I will not be complacent about it.

I want my Department to function at full capacity and to set a pathway for long-term future investment. For my part, I am determined that projects that are a priority for me, such as the A5, will move forward and deliver long-awaited benefits for the people who use them. The progress already made is a starting point. We need to build on that and ensure that the whole system and all parties to it are properly funded and resourced in respect of capacity and capability in order to deliver the system change that is needed. There is lots to do in my Department and, more widely, with key stakeholders in the process, and I am up for that challenge.

As has already been pointed out, the Strategic Investment Board is a matter for the Executive Office, but I am committed to working with every delivery partner to get the whole system working better for everyone. I intend to take some time to understand the progress that has been made to date and to ensure that we do everything possible to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our wider planning system. I note that the proposer of the motion stated that they are not looking for another full-blown review of planning; they are looking at an appraisal of the planning system. I am more than happy to do that. I will continue the work that has already been done and continue to actively pursue and implement the reports that have been published in the most recent period.

I accept that our planning system is not working to its full potential, but we need to be careful not to send out a message to investors here or

potential investors overseas that you cannot do business here in terms of planning :we can. We will do everything within our power to support the development of new industries and the green economy, wherever it may be. We will do our best and work with them to improve it, but let us not send out the message that you cannot do business here.

There are challenges for planning systems across these islands. If you look at some of the major planning applications that are going through in Britain or down South, you see that there is always a challenge. It is down to this: when you listen to the different views on planning in this Room today, you find that what one person, such as Mr Elliott, sees as economic development, another may see as a threat to the environment. It is about getting that balance right, and we have to work within the legislation that is before us to get it right. Mr Allister made a comment about the ammonia policy. I accept that that is a huge challenge for the farming sector, but it is also a huge challenge for the environment. Various elements of that policy are under investigation, and reports will have to be developed on that as well.

I ask colleagues to work with me, and I will work with the Committee and others to ensure that we bring our planning system forward, secure the investment that it requires and deliver sustainable development into the future that benefits rural and urban communities.

Mr Brett: I will start by congratulating my friend and colleague Deborah Erskine on her appointment as Chair of the Committee for Infrastructure and for replacing me as the party's infrastructure spokesperson. You have a big act to follow there [*Laughter.*] I look forward to watching your progress.

In my previous role as chairman of the planning committee of Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council, I had the pleasure of working with Mr Blair, who is now a Member for South Antrim. That council was a great example of how, when a local planning committee and local planners work together, you can get things right. However, in my role as infrastructure spokesperson for the party, I have seen examples across Northern Ireland of the impacts that the planning system can have when it does not work.

I want to touch on a number of points that colleagues have raised. Mr Boylan summed it up perfectly by saying that everyone in the House wants to see an effective and efficient

planning service. That is what we should all be working together to achieve.

Mr McReynolds, I congratulate you on your maiden speech. Well done on making a speech on planning somewhat interesting. It is a hard thing to do. I pay tribute to you for being able to do that. As you rightly said, those major applications need to be high on all our agendas.

I pay tribute to Mr Stewart on his election as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee. He accused Mrs Erskine of contributing with a "word salad" and of getting many words into her motion. I congratulate him on getting to speak for six minutes before catching the attention of Mr Speaker. I know that Mr Stewart will have an important role to play on the Committee. He highlighted a number of points, including the disparity in the local development plan. As someone whose constituency crosses both Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council and Belfast City Council, as other Members have said, I know that you can see applications approved at the Newtownabbey end that may be refused at the Belfast end — that is if you manage to get a Belfast application to decision, and I look to my colleague, Mr Brooks, to try to speed that up, hopefully.

I agree with what Mr Durkan said about resourcing the planning section in councils. We should all encourage our council colleagues to do that, because, ultimately, if they have an efficient and effective planning service, they will attract investment and grow their own rates base, meaning that councils can invest for the future in order to attract more investment. That is certainly something that I focused on with colleagues, and I encourage all Members to urge their colleagues to do that.

I agree with a number of points that Mr Dunne made about delays in statutory consultee responses. However, as the Minister articulated very well, that is something that we, as the House, also need to come to terms with in that we need to give funding to the Department so that it can employ people in Rivers Agency and Roads Service to take that work forward.

5.30 pm

I congratulate Mr Brown on his maiden speech. He raised the issue of animal welfare. I, he and colleagues will continue to raise that through our participation in the all-party group on animal welfare. I particularly welcome his comments on the call-in process. It was frustrating to me during my time as chair of the planning committee that a democratically elected planning committee would make a decision, the

Department would call it in, and it would sit on its desks for 10 or 12 weeks before the Department would simply say, "No problem", with no explanation of why it had been called in. The Department has an important role and can call in applications, but it should do that only in circumstances in which the Department believes that it has added value to give to the process.

I pay tribute to Mr Buckley, who, as always, outlined his views in his trademark, very articulate manner. He highlighted the important role of regionally significant planning applications. The Minister highlighted that as something that he wants to focus his attention on, and I commend him for doing that.

Mr Elliott highlighted the role of planning agents. That can be a huge bugbear for all of us elected representatives. You are contacted by a planning agent who says, "This council is holding up my planning application. It is terrible". You then contact the planning department, which says that the agent still needs to provide a raft of outstanding information. Agents also need to step up to the mark on that.

I also pay tribute to Mr Honeyford for his maiden speech, and I join him in paying tribute to Pat Catney. Pat Catney is a gentleman and was a great addition to the House, and his loss will be felt not only by the Lagan Valley constituency but by all of us in the House. I wish him well for the future.

I agree with many of the points that Mr Allister made to highlight the disparity between councils that I touched on earlier and the ping-pong between Departments and providers of consultee responses, neither of whom seem to want to step up to the mark and make a decision.

I pay tribute to Ms Armstrong for recognising the vital role that our local planners play in our councils. All of us know the planners in our councils. Yes, we may get frustrated by them, but, when you pick up the phone or you try to get information, they try their best. We need to invest more in their development.

Minister, I congratulate you on your appointment. I know that you understand the issue of planning. It was a pleasure to serve with you on the Northern Ireland Chamber's working group on trying to move the process forward. As you rightly say, we do not need a holistic, long-term review — I know that you understand that — but time-limited and focused

actions, and I know that you are committed to achieving that.

It is clear from the debate today that there is a collective will among all Members to work together to achieve the best outcomes possible. We also need to be prepared to invest in the system at all levels. Northern Ireland is open for business, and we should all continue to ensure that we promote Northern Ireland to the best of our ability and give the resources needed to make sure that our planning system can meet those needs. With that, I commend our motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges the importance of the planning process towards growing the Northern Ireland economy and creating places that people want to work, live and invest in; expresses alarm at lengthy delays in determining major applications as well as the often disjointed and ineffective approach to taking forward major projects that have been approved; highlights the need to support thriving rural communities by opposing policies that further constrain development in the countryside; believes the planning process must have the needs of our ageing population and those living with disabilities embedded as first principles; notes that planning and design processes must enable delivery of key Programme for Government outcomes as well as promote green solutions; and calls on the Minister for Infrastructure to commission an urgent and fundamental appraisal of the planning system, including a review of the Strategic Investment Board and its functions.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: As the business in the Order Paper is not expected to be disposed of by 6.00 pm, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue up to 7.00 pm or until the business is completed.

Questions for Urgent Oral Answer

Health

Children's Hospice

Mr Speaker: I have received notice of a question for urgent oral answer from Mr Colin McGrath. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask supplementary questions, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health what steps his Department is taking to ensure that the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice receives the funding needed to reverse the decision to reduce the number of available beds.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for facilitating this question for urgent oral answer.

I recognise and applaud the vital work of the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice and all hospices in Northern Ireland. Last week, my officials engaged in detailed discussions with the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice. It is clear to me that the financial pressures facing the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice go much deeper than any reduction of departmental support. The reduction involved the ending last summer of an additional but temporary annual payment of £170,000.

The temporary payment that was in place since 2018 was to assist the hospice following the closure of a facility in Fermanagh called Horizon West. The funding was for three years, and it was used by the hospice to support the cost of a bed in Belfast. Due to COVID, the funding was extended for a further two years until the end of March 2023. The decision to cease the payment was notified to the Children's Hospice in June 2023 and took effect from September last year. That resulted in a reduction of £85,000.

I took the decision on Friday to reinstate that funding in full for this year, as I had committed to respond by the end of last week. That payment is in addition to the core annual funding of £1.6 million, which my Department is providing directly to the Children's Hospice this year. That core funding also included £420,000 that had not been recurrent, meaning that it had

to be subject to confirmation each year. I can also confirm that it will be made recurrent, which will give the hospice greater certainty, because I am keenly aware that the financial challenges facing the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice go much deeper than this year or next year. Like all healthcare providers, it has encountered significantly rising running costs, reflecting inflationary pressures.

Regrettably, the Children's Hospice has advised my Department that the restoration of the full £170,000 for this year will not lead to the reversal of the service reduction that was made public this week. The Children's Hospice and the Northern Ireland Hospice parent body will need to develop longer-term solutions, of which, I am sure, the Government will want to be supportive. Given the current absence of a Budget for next year and the well-documented financial uncertainties and challenges for the Government, my Department is currently at the limit of what it can do, but I am also very conscious that other hospice organisations and many other health and care providers are also grappling with growing budget pressures and will be seeking further statutory finance.

I am grateful for the support from and the personal interest of the First Minister and deputy First Minister regarding the Children's Hospice's position. I am also aware of the fact that other Northern Ireland Departments have provided financial support to the Children's Hospice in the past, but I believe that the long-term need for financial stability across the whole hospice sector would benefit from cross-departmental input, helping to assist organisations in identifying sustainable ways forward. Consequently, I have written to the Finance Minister to seek further discussions between the charities and our two Departments.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for coming along to answer the question. I congratulate you on being reappointed as Health Minister, and I wish you well in that. I know that there are many competing issues throughout the whole health arena, and I look forward to being able to work with you as a constructive Opposition Health spokesperson on those matters.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this question for urgent oral answer today —.

Mr Speaker: I remind you that it is a question, not a speech, Mr McGrath.

Mr McGrath: I appreciate all that the Minister has done to replenish the funding so far, but does he agree that there needs to be some

form of legislative protection for palliative care? Currently, there is not, but there is in other parts of these islands. It would enable people and organisations to have a surety as they provide the services for people at that very key stage in their lives.

Mr Speaker: The Minister has up to two minutes in which to answer.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his offer to continue working constructively. That is the relationship that we had in the previous mandate.

As I said at the end of my answer, there needs to be a wider discussion, not just across government but with my Department and the Minister of Finance, about how we support all hospice provision. We need to look at the Children's Hospice and how it looks after respite care as well as palliative care. The palliative care section of the Children's Hospice has not been affected by this, so it is about the respite care. There needs to be a wider conversation about palliative care across the entirety of the hospice provision. The unfortunate situation that we have seen with the Children's Hospice enables that conversation to be had at a very early stage of this Government about what needs to be done and what can be done cross-departmentally and with the Opposition's support.

Miss McAllister: I thank the Minister for coming today, and I recognise that he has been in post for only little over a week. We do not want to start apportioning blame today; we want to work constructively. I note that, in his responses, to Colin McGrath and originally, he talked about longer-term solutions, not just for the Children's Hospice but for all the hospice organisations. Does he agree, though, that the Department of Health has a larger role to play in the long-term solutions, particularly around discussions on the sustainability of the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice as a whole? What action, including plans, will he take with the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice to address its future sustainability?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for making that point. It is about the wider conversation around palliative care and respite care and how we work with other hospices. There has been much said about the 50:50 nature of the funding and the understanding that we have with the adult hospices that is not carried across to the Children's Hospice. That is a carry-over from direct rule, from Gordon Brown's time in 2004, I believe. It goes back quite a while. That

relationship and that understanding about funding predates previous Health Ministers who have been involved in conversations with the hospice, so, while my Department has the lead, and I am not in any way shirking that fact, there is a wider cross-governmental remit in regard to how we make sure that the funding is in place for hospices.

The challenge in funding hospices is an example of what we are seeing in funding for Health generally, as I do not have a budget at this time. Part of the challenge for the Children's Hospice was the fact that a large proportion of funding was non-recurrent, but we have been able to make that recurrent.

Mr Brett: I thank the Minister for coming along this evening. I know that, like me, he has a particular interest in the Northern Ireland Hospice and the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice. I thank him for that.

As the Minister will be aware, the hospice has said that the bed reduction will continue to be in place, and it is the collective will of us all to try to overcome that. Has the Minister received a response from the Finance Minister to his invitation to discuss the issue? Secondly, during the budget-setting process for his Department next year, will he make a bid to increase the funding provided to the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I have not received a response as yet, but, as the Member will know, the issue moved very quickly last week — from early engagement with the First Minister and deputy First Minister to a meeting on the Tuesday night about how we, as an Executive, should approach the issue.

As for the specifics of my budgetary bid, the Member will be well aware that I indicated last year that, even if we get a flat cash budget that rolls into the next financial year, we are already looking at a deficit of £1 billion because of pay pressures, inflationary Health pressures and everything else, so I will need to have a wider conversation with my ministerial colleagues to make sure that all parties that committed their support to Health prior to the restoration of the Assembly last week honour that commitment.

Ms Kimmins: As the Minister will know, I spoke to the Children's Hospice just this morning to understand better the situation that it is in. Based on the Minister's answers, I will ask him a question. He mentioned the differentiation between adult hospice funding and the Children's Hospice funding. Will his Department

look at the current funding model for the Children's Hospice to ensure the long-term sustainability of that vital service? As we know, it is much more than just palliative care, and the implications of ensuring that that service stays in place will be far-reaching.

Mr Swann: I welcome the new Chair of the Health Committee to her position and appreciate the engagement that we had this morning.

Mr Speaker, I want to correct the record. It was not Gordon Brown but Des Browne who was Minister at that time. I got a wee bit carried away there. The policy position on the funding of hospices, including the adult hospice — the 50:50 — was implemented in 2004 and has not changed. The current funding of children's respite services is, as the Member said, in the region of 70:30, which is 70% coming from hospice provision. However, the current funding of children's community services is more closely aligned to the 50:50. The decision last week to make the non-recurrent funding of £420,000 recurrent should start to move that dial a little bit, but there needs to be a realignment in the relationship that we have with the Northern Ireland Hospice, which is the parent body for the Children's Hospice. Again, that is part of the conversation on the larger funding package and the support for palliative and respite care.

Mr Chambers: No one doubts the absolutely critical and unique role of the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice, so I pay tribute to everyone who works in it on the amazing work that they do.

I also welcome the Minister's intervention on Friday, which was gratefully welcomed by the hospice management. Minister, are you hopeful of a positive response to your recent letter to the Finance Minister? Can the Assembly do anything to assist the Executive to find a lasting and sustainable outcome?

5.45 pm

Mr Swann: The Member will know that, as the Health Minister for Northern Ireland, I am always an optimist. That is why I took the job on for a second time: I believe in the health service of Northern Ireland and in the commitments and expressions of support that we received prior to the restoration on Saturday a week ago that health would be a priority for all parties in the Chamber, be they in the Executive or the Opposition. It is about how we move, over the next few weeks and months, when we see the outworkings of the Budget and how money is

divided between Departments to deal with the pressures that are being witnessed. I sincerely hope that the other Executive parties and the Opposition do not make health a political football. We did not do that in the last mandate, and I hope that we will not do it in this one.

Mr Kingston: I thank the Minister for his answers so far and Colin McGrath for bringing the issue to the Floor. It is important that we all do what we can to support the hospice and the Children's Hospice, which, I am glad to say, while they are based in North Belfast, are Province-wide facilities.

Will the Minister reiterate the importance of public fundraising in support of the hospice? I understand that, currently, around 30% comes from statutory funding and 70% comes from voluntary fundraising. With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I will mention a practical way in which Members can support it. In three weeks' time, I will run the Tokyo marathon. I am raising funds for the Children's Hospice. I have my shirt that I will be wearing on the day. I have a JustGiving link on my Twitter and Facebook accounts. Seriously, public fundraising and support is very important to this vital service. We should all encourage the public to continue to support the hospices.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his support. I would not want to indulge any sort of advertising in the Chamber, Mr Speaker, but I congratulate the Member for what he is doing and encourage anyone who is in the Chamber or is listening and wants to support Mr Kingston in his fundraising to do so. I will certainly contribute to that as well.

While we see the imperfect balance of the 30%/70% mix of statutory and voluntary contributions, the Children's Hospice has been clear that the issue has been due to a downturn in voluntary subscriptions to what is a very worthy charity organisation and the work that it does. I hope that what has happened in the past week raises the profile of the Children's Hospice and that we see a benefit in an increase in funding. I commend Mr Kingston for his endeavours.

Ms Bradshaw: I wish you well in your new role, Minister. You will be aware that Marie Curie has been calling for a new palliative care strategy. When will you take a decision on that? When will you announce whether you will continue funding for the cancer charities support fund?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Can I just say that I will miss her presence on the Health

Committee? I notice that she has managed to ask two supplementary questions that are not directly related to the question for urgent oral answer.

Support for cancer charities is crucial. With regard to the cancer charities support fund and the mental health fund that I was able to establish during the last mandate, I do not, at this minute in time, have any budgetary leeway to extend those programmes in this financial year, no matter how hard I try or how hard I look. I am conscious that we are approaching the end of a financial year, so, through the Member's support and that of her colleagues on the Executive, I look forward to receiving an endorsement for the health budget.

Economy

Job Losses: BT

Mr Speaker: Mrs Deborah Erskine has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister for the Economy. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question.

Mrs Erskine asked the Minister for the Economy to urgently engage with BT regarding potential job losses at its Enniskillen site.

Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy): BT has announced that, as part of a global review of its estates provision and operations, it intends to undertake a review of the future of its customer services site in Enniskillen. I appreciate that the announcement of the review of the Enniskillen site will have caused great anxiety and concern for many of the 300 staff who work there. BT, however, has stressed that no decision has yet been taken on the future of the site. That decision is pending the outcome of the review. My officials in Invest NI were in contact with BT last week and are meeting BT senior management tomorrow. Invest NI will work closely with the company over the coming weeks and explore all opportunities to influence a positive outcome for the staff who may be impacted on by any decision taken.

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Economy Minister for coming to the Chamber this evening, and I take the opportunity to congratulate him on his new role. Potentially losing 300 jobs from Enniskillen is hugely significant to my constituency, given

the large proportion of workers employed by BT Group in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I regret that the Minister has not said anything publicly about that until this evening. He can correct me if I am wrong. Will he commit to doing everything possible to stop those job losses? For example, if BT needs smaller premises as part of its consolidation, will he continue to work with Invest NI and other bodies to find such premises and make sure that BT Group remains part of the local economy in Enniskillen?

Mr C Murphy: I thank the Member for her question. I am at a slight disadvantage, in that, if I were responding to an announcement about those jobs, I might have more to say, but I am responding to a statement that announces a review, the outcome of which we do not know, although I agree with her that it raises a very significant concern. The rural west is an area that has largely lacked investment, both in its economy and in its infrastructure, which leads to economic investment. As a rural dweller and a border dweller, I get the urgency around the matter. As I have said, officials have already spoken to BT and will engage with its senior management tomorrow. This is part of an estates review, so I am not aware that it is a search for a different type of premises. Rather, it is a global exercise that BT has undertaken concerning its operations and its estate. We will, of course, endeavour to do all that we can to ensure that jobs are kept in Enniskillen and that those people who may, at some future date, become subject to a decision taken here get all the support that they can. In the first instance, however, the priority is to ensure that jobs are kept where they are needed.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the Minister to his place as Minister for the Economy. I wish him well. The BT announcement stated that it had invested with "brilliant new and refurbished buildings". Has the Minister any idea where those brilliant refurbished buildings are? Are they only in Belfast or are they in other rural areas? Why did BT not invest in Enniskillen? I know that it is difficult for the Minister to answer at this stage. I just wonder whether he has any idea, or whether he will pose the question to BT.

Mr C Murphy: Again, I find myself hamstrung by the fact that I am responding to an announcement of a review rather than to an announcement of a decision, but the question for urgent oral answer was taken, and here we are. I am not aware of what estate BT is looking at currently, other than that it is part of a global review of its operations and estate. My officials

in Invest NI are dealing with BT and will be meeting representatives from it tomorrow. If there is any further update, I will be able to inform the Member.

Ms Á Murphy: I place on record my serious concerns at the recent news of possible job losses at BT in Enniskillen, which, of course, would have a detrimental impact on families and on the local economy in County Fermanagh. Will your departmental officials consult with BT to protect workers at this deeply concerning time?

Mr C Murphy: Yes, they have been doing that and will continue to do so. As I said to the Member who asked the original question, I appreciate that potential job losses anywhere are to be regretted, but, in areas that do not have a good level of investment, such as the rural west, it is a matter of particular concern for entire communities. Of course, we will engage with BT as to what the possible outcome of its review might be and try to offer all the support that we can to the people of Enniskillen.

Ms Eastwood: I thank the Member for tabling her question for urgent oral answer, and I thank the Minister for his statement. What role do the Department and Invest NI have in strategic investment in business infrastructure across the North and in ensuring that jobs remain in a way that addresses the issue of regional imbalance?

Mr C Murphy: As I said, regional balance will be a particular focus of mine. I have made no secret of that, and I intend to give a statement to the House next week in relation to the broad approach to the policy across the Department for the Economy. Invest and the Department have a role to support business, to try to ensure that we sustain the jobs that we have and to attract and create more jobs, and to try to ensure, as I will into the future, that there is a regional balance approach to all that.

Some of the decisions are taken by commercial companies in their own business interests. They are global companies, and they take global decisions outside the direct influence of the Executive or, indeed, the Department for the Economy. However, we will do all in our power to ensure that we sustain and maintain as many jobs as we can and that we get the proper spread of those jobs when we are creating them right across the entirety of the jurisdiction.

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his responses so far, and I congratulate him on his appointment to the role of Minister for the

Economy. I look forward to working with him in the near future.

Regional balance is very much at the heart of what I want to see for my region. Certainly, however, the potential for the loss of 300 jobs in Fermanagh would have devastating consequences right across the county and the west. I look forward to the Minister's proposals in and around regional balance in the coming weeks. It is the duty and responsibility of the Government to make sure that we have the policies in place in order to attract investors.

Mr Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Ms McLaughlin: We cannot just put it on the long finger. I look forward to hearing your thoughts about legislating for regional balance.

Mr C Murphy: As I said, I will be making a statement to the Assembly, I think, next week in relation to all these matters, and I will expand on that further. Of course, we take that responsibility very seriously, and I have made no secret of the fact that I do not believe that there has been regional balance, particularly in areas like the west, the north-west and even the south, and where I come from in south Armagh, which have suffered from a lack of investment. That goes for Newry and other areas in south Down as well. We want to see that corrected in the time ahead, and we will work to see it corrected.

In relation to this particular question, I appreciate that, in an area that has seen underinvestment, such a substantial potential loss of jobs would be very devastating. However, we are in a situation where we have to focus on skills and on getting people to a place where they can be available for jobs. We have a situation where we have more people seeking employees than we have available. It is a situation where, if a global company such as BT takes a decision that is detrimental to an area, we will put all our focus on ensuring that there are other opportunities for people in that area and in the areas that have been underinvested in to date.

Mr Speaker: That concludes this item of business.

Adjourned at 5.58 pm.