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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 12 March 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Members' Statements

Mr Speaker: Members who wish to make a statement should rise in their place. You will have three minutes in which to make your statement, and there will be no interventions or points of order until this item of business has finished.

Marie Curie Great Daffodil Appeal

Mr Dunne: Mr Speaker, it is good to see you back in your Chair this morning. I rise to support the incredible work of Marie Curie and its great daffodil appeal. Each year, March marks Marie Curie's great daffodil appeal, through which the charity seeks to raise awareness of the need to support better end-of-life care for carers, families and loved ones across Northern Ireland, and the barriers that exist. Marie Curie is a charity that has a very special place in the hearts of many people in every corner of our country. I have had the honour and privilege over the years of collecting for the charity on a number of occasions across North Down, on the streets and in a number of shopping centres. It is always amazing to see the kindness and generosity of the public through their donations, despite the cost-of-living crisis that we are in. It is certainly very humbling and heartening to see how generous people can be. I encourage everybody in the Chamber and beyond to lend an hour of their time to this very worthy cause. It is a humbling and heartening experience.

I take this opportunity to thank the thousands of volunteers who collect for Marie Curie all year round, especially during the great daffodil appeal every March. I commend the dedicated team of staff, including management and administrative staff, in the Marie Curie hospice in Belfast. I also commend the Marie Curie North Down fundraising group, with which I have worked on a number of projects, for its tireless work all year round to support vital services for those who are in need of end-of-life care and support.

Behind every daffodil there is a story, and I have always been heartened and humbled to hear the different stories behind every donation. When you are collecting, people come up to you, and so many of them talk of their personal experiences with very close relatives and friends and how they have been impacted by terminal illness. They highlight the ways in which Marie Curie has brought comfort, and hope as well, to families in some of their darkest moments.

I hope that today will also be a reminder to everybody that support is available for those who are facing the end of their life with a terminal diagnosis and for their families. It is important that we, as an Assembly and Executive, should be working to remove any remaining barriers to people getting that vital end-of-life care and support through such difficult times.

I know from personal experience with my late father, Gordon Dunne, who was a Member of this House for more than 10 years, just how impactful the support of Marie Curie can be through the most difficult days, with end-of-life care, and also, importantly, I want to highlight the support that Marie Curie provided to our family through such devastation.

Young Carers Action Day

Mr Gildernew: I rise as chair of the all-party group on carers to highlight the fact that tomorrow, 13 March, is Young Carers Action Day. This year's theme is fair futures for young carers, and the day will focus on building a more equal future for young carers and, crucially, removing barriers that many of their peers will not face.

Colleagues, there are more than 17,500 child and young adult carers here in the North that we know of — there are many that we do not know of — representing roughly 8% of all unpaid carers. Many young carers feel that they are conditioned to expect less from life, and that is, in some ways, an indictment on all of us.

It is also important to note that there is a deep sense of unfairness that young carers receive no financial recognition for their caring roles. They are helping to prop up the health and social care system, but they do not get any of the financial support available to young carers in other places, such as Scotland. It is also important to highlight that there is no service — absolutely none — available in the North for young adult carers between the ages of 18 and 24. As has been said by some of those young carers:

"It feels as though everything stops at 18. You need help to get through this time, when everything else is ending."

There is a cliff edge for some of those hard-pressed carers.

I want to highlight some of the words of Bláithnaid Girvan, who I met recently at the all-party group on carers, a young activist and carer herself. Bláithnaid said:

"As young carers, our lives are very different to other people. From a young age, we have already been exposed to many difficult experiences and challenges, including medical emergencies, e.g. surgeries and calling 999 and always staying alert for signs of epilepsy or life-threatening shunt failure. I hope to go to university and pursue a career, but how will I balance this with my caring role? Every time I talk, or even think, about this, it makes me cry."

That is the pressure that young carers are under. I ask everybody who will be working with children and young people, tomorrow and this week, to take a good look — maybe an extra look — at that young person in front of you and ask yourself this: is there a reason for the homework not being in — something that, maybe, other children are not facing? Is there a reason for them to be checking their phone every 10 minutes? Is it because they are worried about something that may be going on at home?

I think that we absolutely need to do better by all carers, but young adult and child carers, in particular, deserve our support.

Racist and Intimidating Signs

Ms Nicholl: Last week, we witnessed racist and intimidating signs going up in Finaghy that do not reflect the values of the community and that were, rightly, condemned by so many. So many reasons have given licence to those signs

going up: an anti-immigrant narrative, a lack of housing, our failure to tackle sectarianism and racism, and it can sometimes feel as though there is no end in sight to those. With that in mind, it is important to highlight the examples of good.

I declare a proud interest: my son goes to Knockbreda Nursery School, and it was recently awarded the UNICEF gold award for being a rights respecting school. It is the first mainstream nursery school in Northern Ireland to receive that award.

The award recognises that the nursery school has embedded the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into its fabric. Every child who goes there knows the song about their rights, and their parents now know it too, because they hear it all the time. It is wonderful that young people are being brought up to respect one another and their differences and to know and embrace their rights.

We can look at examples in our community that are really negative and worrying but then reflect on the really good work that is happening in our school communities. I pay tribute to Knockbreda Nursery School — Mrs Welsh, in particular — for being awarded gold.

Charlie Bird

Mr O'Toole: I want to pay tribute to Charlie Bird, whose passing was confirmed today. Charlie Bird will be known to many people in politics here and people across this island as one of Ireland's most talented and well-known journalists over the past 40 years.

In 2021, Charlie Bird was diagnosed with motor neurone disease. He used his voice and his prominence to deal with what is, as many of us will know, an appalling, degenerative disease that attacks the ability for a body to function and, therefore, is extraordinarily difficult for the sufferer and their friends and loved ones, not simply by bearing that disease in public but by campaigning and raising awareness of motor neurone disease, including through wonderful initiatives such as Climb with Charlie, for which he and others ascended Croagh Patrick a year or two ago.

His suffering in public was, at times, difficult to watch. He was so prominent and was involved in covering for RTÉ so many of the major events of the past 40 years, including large parts of the peace process in the North. His use of his profile and platform with such dignity and courage not only to raise awareness of the

appalling nature of motor neurone disease but to raise funds to fund research into motor neurone disease is an extraordinary tribute to him as an individual.

It is also worth saying that he was one of this island's most respected journalists. As I said, he covered many of the major global events over the past half century, including our peace process here. It is a very sad day for all of us who are interested in the news and in good journalism. It is particularly important for all the people on this island and further afield who have dealt with the appalling affliction that is motor neurone disease and their families to mark Charlie's passing and to pay our respects and condolences to his wife, their broader family and all those who knew and loved him.

I hope that his legacy will be greater funding for research into motor neurone disease, progress in tackling and mitigating that terrible affliction and greater awareness for those who have to suffer with it that there can be joy and purpose to those final years. Again, I pay tribute to Charlie Bird.

Child Poverty: NIAO Report

Mr Baker: I welcome the report from the NI Audit Office (NIAO) today on child poverty. The report outlines in detail that one in five children in the North is living in poverty. Children receiving free school meals are twice as likely to leave school with no GCSEs, and there are ongoing concerns around their school attendance. All evidence shows that children who grow up in poverty are more likely to experience health inequalities, have lower levels of educational attainment and to experience poverty as adults.

It is clear from the report that there is much work to be done to address the growing levels of child poverty and that there are lessons to be learnt as work continues towards finalising the anti-poverty strategy. It is vital that the Minister for Communities, whose Department is the lead on the issue, makes that a key priority. I urge him to bring forward a timeline for the strategy's completion as a matter of urgency and to ensure that the recommendations made in today's report are considered as part of that process. The cost of not doing so is simply too high, both for those affected personally and for public services in the long term.

Poverty is a political choice, and we must be united in the commitment to eradicate it. We must remain focused on addressing inequality in all its forms and on improving the prosperity

of and opportunities for all citizens, especially our children and young people.

Together Campaign: Ban Hunting with Dogs

Mr Blair: I want to bring to the attention of the House the launch of a campaign today by the USPCA and the League Against Cruel Sports to ban hunting with dogs in Northern Ireland. The groups have named it the Together campaign.

10.45 am

It is absolutely shameful that, in 2024, Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK without such a ban. Members will know that it is a matter that is very close to my heart and that I previously tried to introduce a ban through the Assembly. It was disappointing that the Bill narrowly failed on that occasion, and it was a palpable shock that Sinn Féin did not support it, despite a previous public commitment to supporting a ban on fox hunting. I do, however, remain grateful for the cross-party support that was achieved for the Bill on that occasion.

There is no doubt that hunting with dogs is an outdated and brutally cruel activity that has no place in a civilised, modern-day society. The practices and effects of hunting, such as wild mammals being chased across fields in the countryside and dogs suffering life-threatening injuries, are not sources of entertainment: far from it. That so-called sport is cruel both to the wild animals being hunted and to the dogs that are being used in the hunt and encouraged to chase and kill those wild animals.

I thank the USPCA and the League Against Cruel Sports for organising a constructive engagement session with all parties a few weeks ago in the Building. That is a clear sign that there has been progress on the matter and that there is now an opportunity for all parties to work together. I ask the House to note that that cross-party engagement is ongoing.

The campaign that the groups have launched today reminds us that it really is time for change in Northern Ireland. I urge the public to support the campaign, and I once again make clear the widespread opposition to that barbaric practice. I also call on Members from all parties to ensure that this is the mandate in which we deliver in the interests of animal welfare. It is crucial not only that we bring Northern Ireland into line with other jurisdictions but that we lead the way by surpassing their standards of animal welfare. The time has come to do the right thing, together.

Libraries NI: Trans Agenda

Mr Allister: Libraries NI, like many other public bodies, proclaims that its resources are tight and that it is short of money. I was therefore very disappointed to discover from the exposé in yesterday's Belfast 'News Letter' that Libraries NI has thought it appropriate to spend thousands upon thousands of pounds on books promoting the trans agenda, with toddlers no less.

Part of the headline in the 'News Letter' article was:

"Libraries Northern Ireland stocking transgender-themed titles aimed at toddlers".

When you explore, you discover that that is exactly what is happening. Books such as 'Introducing Teddy', which is said to be for children aged up to five, has cartoon characters switching gender. Another book, '10,000 Dresses', aimed at ages five to six, has a little boy being told by his mother that boys do not dress up in dresses. The mother is then vilified in that book, to the point that the child runs away. That book is for five- and six-year-olds.

Why is Libraries NI in the business of corrupting young people through a trans agenda, which, in later years, could lead some of them to the horrendous experience of puberty blockers, untold physical damage and psychological damage, and then a desire to try to reverse all of that? Really? Has Libraries NI nothing better to do with its money than to engage in such promotion of the trans agenda?

I call on the Minister for Communities to take an interest in the issue, investigate it and take a stand on it.

Monkstown Boxing Club: Funding

Ms Brownlee: I rise to highlight the serious funding concerns that have been raised with me by Monkstown Boxing Club. Sports clubs across Northern Ireland do incredible work in their local areas. In my constituency of East Antrim, we are blessed with numerous clubs that make a tangible difference each and every day, and Monkstown Boxing Club is no exception. Aside from the well-documented physical and mental benefits of sport and physical activity, particularly those of boxing, the club offers so much by way of education and life skills programmes. One such programme, In Your Corner, is an innovative

educational support programme that is funded through the Department of Education's Fair Start budget, which targets the objectives and aims of championing emotional health and well-being, promoting a whole-community approach to education and maximising potential. Over the past seven years, the programme has been instrumental in providing young people at the risk of educational underachievement with invaluable opportunities to realise their potential, pursue their aspirations and increase their confidence.

Due to a significant cut in the Fair Start budget for the In Your Corner programme this financial year, all the project staff find themselves in the grave position of being on protected notice for the second successive year. Despite their unwavering dedication to the betterment of the community, they have yet to receive confirmation or a letter for the new financial year. With the looming deadline of 31 March fast approaching, staff members are understandably consumed with uncertainty and anxiety regarding the future of their employment. The fact that Monkstown Boxing Club is faced with the very real prospect of losing its dedicated team members and the vital services that they provide is deeply distressing not only for the club but for the countless young people whose lives have been positively impacted on by the programme and the club's services.

I know that the Minister will continue to press the Executive for a budget outcome that will allow him to confirm funding for the 2024-25 financial year. The continuation of this programme is crucial not only for the well-being and development of our youth but for the broader community. Securing the necessary funding would safeguard the future of Monkstown Boxing Club and reaffirm a commitment to fostering educational opportunities and nurturing the potential of our communities' children and young people.

Jude Gallagher: Olympic Games Qualification

Mr McHugh: Ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas ó chroí a dhéanamh le Jude Gallagher as Lios Glas, Contae Thír Eoghain. [Translation: From the heart, I congratulate Jude Gallagher from Newtownstewart in County Tyrone.] It is ironic that I am talking about boxing too. Only yesterday, Jude qualified for the Olympic Games as a result of his feat against his Turkmenistani opponent in the world championship qualifying tournament. Jude is very dedicated to his sport. We have just heard

how the sport of boxing adds to individuals and communities in so many ways. It is a great achievement on Jude's part and a reflection of the standards that are set by the Irish boxing fraternity in every respect; we are world-renowned for our ability to compete at world level in boxing in particular.

I also acknowledge the work done by Jude's family. His father, John, whom I know personally, was responsible for the establishment of the boxing club in Newtownstewart. Jude now goes forward with the full support of all the people in Tyrone and throughout the whole of Ireland — all those on this island — who hope that he will come home with medals from the Olympic Games. *Ádh mór ort, a Jude. [Translation: I wish Jude the best of luck.]*

Strabane Town Centre Regeneration

Mr McCrossan: Following on from my colleague Maolíosa McHugh, I add my congratulations to Jude Gallagher on what has been an exceptional achievement. The whole of Tyrone is extremely proud of him and his achievements, and we wish him well.

I rise to outline concern about Strabane town centre. From 2019, a project has been sitting there in relation to the public realm scheme that has been promised for many decades. The town centre is currently in a very poor condition. Footpaths are not even, roads are in a very difficult condition, and elderly and vulnerable people are slipping and tripping in the town centre. That causes a huge amount of frustration for local traders, local people and those who travel in the town centre. There is a not a week goes by that I do not hear about somebody slipping or falling in the town centre. Whenever I raise that with the Department for Infrastructure, I am told that it does not meet the standard because the trip level does not meet its requirement.

The sad reality is that a public realm scheme for Strabane town centre was passed by planning in 2019. Indeed, it has been sitting with the Department for Communities since then, and there is a business case outstanding as well. An investment of £7 million has been earmarked as part of that. That will be hugely welcome, and I am very excited about the potential and the opportunities that will arise as a result of that regeneration of Strabane town centre. However, delays are causing considerable concern, and, in anticipation of the project's happening, no maintenance work or repairs are occurring in the town centre, so it is

falling into further disrepair. I have raised that with the Minister for Communities and the Minister for Infrastructure, and I continue to work with the local council on the issue.

It is important that when it comes to our town centres — the hearts of our communities — we do everything possible to ensure that they are attractive, welcoming and safe for everyone at all times. I am hopeful that, in the next few weeks, we will see an announcement about Strabane town centre and see the £7 million regeneration coming to fruition, because it will be of tremendous benefit to the people whom I represent in that area.

Strabane is very well located. It sits at the heart of an economic triangle: it is on the doorstep of Donegal, with the county town of Omagh on one side and the maiden city of Derry on the other. It is a good place to do business in and a good place to live. I would like to see it getting its fair share of the cake. I truly hope that, in the next few weeks, we see the rejuvenation project being delivered and the public realm scheme finally being put in place.

Mr Speaker: That concludes Members' statements.

Mr Gildernew: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you listen again to the contribution of Jim Allister this morning, which contained an unwarranted and disgraceful attack on an entire section of our children? Will you look at his remarks to see whether they were in keeping with the conduct expected in the House?

Mr Speaker: I can certainly look at them. I was listening quite carefully to Mr Allister, but I am happy to look at them.

The next item of business is a motion to affirm a statutory rule. The Finance Minister has asked us to give her a few minutes as she is not feeling the best. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments while we see whether we can proceed with that item of business.

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

11.00 am

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 11.15 am. Sorry, everybody, for the inconvenience. Thank you for your patience.

The sitting was suspended at 11.01 am and resumed at 11.16 am.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, although business resumed at 11.16 am, I ask you to take your ease. If there are further updates, I will let you know. Thank you again for your patience.

The House took its ease from 11.17 am to 11.25 am.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, I am sorry about this, but I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 11.30 am.

Mr Allister: On a point of order. Will you advise the House as to why we are not simply moving on to the next business?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you for that, Mr Allister. We are currently considering the matter, and there will certainly be clarity by 11.30 am. Thank you.

The sitting was suspended at 11.25 am and resumed at 11.30 am.

Executive Committee Business

Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item of business is a motion to affirm a statutory rule.

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): Apologies.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: You are OK.

Dr Archibald: I beg to move

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 be affirmed.

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

Dr Archibald: Members will be aware that legislation to set the regional rate for businesses and households —.

Ms Ennis: On a point of order, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. The Minister is not feeling well at the minute. I ask for your indulgence to permit her to watch the debate on the TV in her room. The Minister will follow the debate and respond to it when it is finished.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes, that is fair enough.

Dr Archibald: I will speak briefly to the legislation.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes, do what you can briefly, and we will take it from there.

Dr Archibald: Thank you.

Members will be aware that legislation to set the regional rate for businesses and households is passed annually and that the procedure is usually part of the Budget process. Owing to timing issues, however, that has not been possible for the 2024-25 regional rates. Regional rates are therefore being considered separately to ensure that rate bills issue on time in April. The late issuing of bills, even by a short

period, leads to a compressed time being available for rate collection and increased rate arrears.

So far this year, Land and Property Services (LPS) has collected £1.5 billion in rates. The revenue raised from the regional rates provides around 5% of the Executive's resource budget, providing vital funding for hospitals, roads, schools and other essential public services. It also provides 75% of council income for local services. Taken together, the domestic and non-domestic regional rates — the amount from rates that goes to the Executive — are forecast to raise around £700 million in the forthcoming financial year.

When it comes to the specific breakdown of rates bills, the regional rate represents just over half the typical bill, with the other half being made up of district rates. The Executive have no decision-making power over the level of the rate poundage, which local councils set. Councils set them in the context of their expenditure needs. There is a role for both the Executive and local councils, moving forward, in carefully managing the acceptability of a tax that is so vital to funding the needs of citizens.

The legislation before the House today will fix two regional rates in the pound for 2024-25: one for domestic ratepayers and one for non-domestic ratepayers. Mindful of the pressures on household budgets and businesses, Executive colleagues and I have decided to keep the regional rate in line with inflation. Too great an increase runs the risk of less being collected and of eroding the tax base. It is also clear, however, that we need to increase the funding available to us to meet the acute pressures across public services. That is why we have agreed to a consumer prices index (CPI) inflationary uplift of 4% for domestic and non-domestic ratepayers. That means that owners of a domestic property with an average capital value within the rating system of £123,000 will pay 46p a week more on the regional rate element of their bill. For businesses with a rateable value of £50,000, it will mean an additional £10.73 a week on that element.

Some may argue that the regional rate should be frozen in cash terms or reduced in order to alleviate the pressures of the current economic backdrop, which continue to affect businesses and households. Others have made public their view that rates should be higher. Failure to raise the regional rate at all would mean fewer resources for other areas that all Members care about: healthcare, education, roads and investment in other essential public services.

Our priority as an Executive is to ensure sustainable finances to deliver high-quality public services. Underpinning that must be a commitment to funding on the basis of need. Members will be aware that Treasury's position on the financial package is that the write-off of £559 million is conditional on raising income through local revenue and the production of a sustainability plan. My strong view and that of the Executive is that the £559 million of debt exists due to the underfunding of public services. However, starting our 2025-26 Budget in a deficit of that quantum would do inconceivable harm to our public services.

Following positive engagement, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has recognised the challenges of raising £113 million of revenue, given how close we are to the start of the financial year and the limited financial levers that are at our disposal. The Chief Secretary has agreed flexibility that that can be generated over 24 months instead of 12 months. Treasury has been clear that the enhanced time frame for the development of a sustainability plan and to generate the £113 million of locally raised income is contingent on the Executive delivering a balanced Budget in 2024-25.

The Executive's recommendation to the Assembly should be seen as a clear demonstration that we recognise that we need to ensure that our finances are on a more sustainable footing in order to deliver high-quality public services. We are acutely aware of the huge pressures on our public services and, in setting the regional rate, the need to balance that with the pressures facing households and businesses. That is why the existing £350 million of rates support provided to households and businesses will continue for 2024-25. That will see the continuation of £240 million of rates support provided to 75% of non-domestic ratepayers. That includes the small business rate relief scheme, which supports 29,000 businesses. Over 4,400 manufacturing firms will continue to be supported by 70% off their rates through industrial derating. That relief is unique to this jurisdiction.

In addition to the existing business rates support, I intend to reintroduce the Back in Business scheme. It will help to reduce the number of vacant retail units in our high streets, support new enterprises and attract businesses on to the high street and into our town centres. I also intend to reinstate the exemption from rates for rural ATMs to encourage and sustain access to cash in rural areas. Those measures will inject some stability and continuity into the rates system and help to address some

immediate concerns that business trade bodies have raised with me since taking office.

In recognition of the pressures on households and families, the £100 million of rates support, including reliefs and rebates tailored for those on low incomes or social security support, lone pensioners aged 70 or over and those who have adapted their homes to facilitate a disability will continue in the year ahead. We have support measures here that are not in place in England, Scotland and Wales. Likewise, they will have support measures that the Executive have not been able or have not chosen to introduce. With the constraints on finances at present, a key consideration for the Executive will be whether the cost of new rates support in future should be offset by reductions in the current suite of generous policies in the rating system. Some Members have suggested policy interventions in the rating system. It is important to make it clear that those could not have been implemented procedurally or legislatively for April 2024, given the timing of the Executive's return at the start of February. I am committed to continuing to develop the rating system to ensure that it is fair, equitable and progressive and is aligned with the Executive's economic vision. Expanding our tax base should be a priority, supporting businesses to grow and create jobs, building more houses to support communities and providing suitable homes for our citizens.

Land and Property Services is already moving ahead with preparations for Reval2026. It builds on previous cross-party commitments to frequent revaluation cycles and ensuring that rates valuations for business are kept as up to date and as responsive as possible to changes in the rental market. That follows the completion of three non-domestic revaluations in eight years, which puts us ahead of England, Scotland and Wales in terms of revaluations for businesses and continues to guard against sudden and unexpected shifts in valuations.

Members will be aware that a consultation on domestic and non-domestic rating reliefs concluded last month. Although the NIO consultation was focused on maximising revenue, and therefore was too binary in nature to inform any nuanced change, there were still over 1,400 responses. I want to take time to consider those responses.

They have been useful in providing us, an incoming Executive and Assembly, with a fresh evidence base to be supplemented through additional policy and options appraisal work and further engagement. That process will allow me

to set an informed strategic direction for medium- and long-term changes in the system.

I now move to the more technical matters covered in the order. The main purpose of the order is to give effect to the Executive decision for the regional rates for 2024-25. Article 1 sets out the title of the order and gives the operational date as the day after it is affirmed by the Assembly. Article 2 provides that the order will apply for the 2024-25 rating year through to 31 March 2025. Article 3 specifies 29.02p in the pound as the non-domestic regional poundage and 0.5042p in the pound as the domestic regional rate poundage. I look forward to hearing Members' comments, and I commend the order to the House.

Mr O'Toole (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I will first speak as Chair of the Finance Committee before speaking as leader of the Opposition. First, I acknowledge that the Minister is not feeling well. Hopefully, she feels better soon. Obviously, it is a challenge to do these things when you have a head cold.

I thank the Minister for her comments. My remarks as Finance Committee Chair will reflect the scrutiny that members have performed on the order. Unlike with the Budget Bill, we had the opportunity to have a couple of evidence sessions on the order. The Committee was aware that the regional rate was part of the consultation on potential revenue raising that was ordered by the Secretary of State prior to the restoration of the Executive. Therefore, members were keen to get a sense of whether there would be a poundage struck for the regional rate that sought to raise the £113 million target for local revenue raising and what preparation might have been made for that.

While the issue was raised with senior departmental officials at the Committee's first meeting on 14 February, the Committee agreed to seek a briefing from Land and Property Services. To that end, members received a briefing on 21 February from the director of rating policy on the proposed statutory rule to stipulate the regional rate for domestic and non-domestic property that will apply for the 2024-25 rating year. At that meeting, members noted that the Executive still needed to agree on the poundage multipliers in the context of their wider approach to the Budget settlement for 2024-25.

The Committee received a further briefing from LPS on 28 February, which covered a number of related issues, including the regional rates order and poundage scenarios. Members were

informed that the Executive were expected to consider the regional rate at their meeting the following day, 29 February. If the Executive agreed on the poundage at that meeting, the Committee would receive the regional rates order immediately following that decision. On 29 February, members were emailed a copy of the written ministerial statement regarding the regional rates uplift for 2024-25, with the SR being formally laid in the Business Office at the same time. The statement was received by the Committee in advance of its wider circulation, and I thank the Minister for that courtesy.

At the Committee's meeting on 6 March, members formally considered the statutory rule, which stipulates in legislation the regional rate for domestic and non-domestic property for the 2024-25 rating year. The Committee noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules has reported formally on the rule and that there are no matters to be drawn to the Committee's attention. Members also noted that the Minister's written statement had not specifically stated the figure for the poundage multiplier and that the measure of inflation that was used was not detailed.

At the meeting on 6 March, the Committee considered SR 2024/28, the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (NI) 2024. As there were opposing voices when the Question was put to agree the SR, a vote followed, with six Ayes, one No and one abstention. Therefore, the motion — that the Committee agree to recommend that the SR be affirmed by the Assembly — was passed.

I now end my comments as Finance Committee Chair. I will now speak as leader of the Opposition. We have been a constructive Opposition in the first month and a bit of our time here, and, in doing so, rather than simply carping, we have sought to acknowledge, despite our concerns over how the financial package was agreed and despite, obviously, our frustration and disagreement with these institutions having been down for two years, the fact that the incoming Executive were placed in a position that they did not entirely create vis-à-vis the public finances.

To that end, we did not specifically oppose; we abstained on the Budget Bill. The Opposition will not endorse the regional rates order. As a member of the Finance Committee, I did not support it.

11.45 am

It is important to set out a bit of the context. I want to make a couple of points that, I hope, the Minister can hear and respond to, and I acknowledge that she is not feeling 100%. I welcome the fact that she is able to participate in the debate and to move the motion the order.

We have consistently said that, alongside anything to do with revenue raising, we need a clear, costed plan with a timeline for public - service recovery. Indeed, the Assembly endorsed the Opposition's amendment to the very first substantive motion that we debated in the Chamber, which was to insist on a costed plan with a timeline for public-service recovery. We have yet to see that. We have yet even to know when it will be provided to us, despite its being the firm will not just of the Opposition but of the entire Chamber. Not only that, but we now know that we are unlikely to have anything approaching a multi-year Budget. Some of that is connected to the fact that there will be a Westminster election this year, and we await an SR from a new Government. However, that should not stop the Executive parties, who have been meeting and discussing a Programme for Government for, as far as I am aware, nearly two years now, providing an indicative set of spending priorities next to a multi-year Programme for Government and a plan to rescue public services. That should not be that difficult. When the Minister spoke about the regional rates order, she alluded to the various long-term priorities that the Executive are discussing, so it is clearly the position that the Executive and the Executive parties are already discussing financial priorities and relating them to their priorities. The Opposition will continue to press for — we have not had it yet, and I am not sure when we will get it — a costed plan with a timeline for public-service recovery in the short and long term. I do not know when we are going to get it.

I do not even know precisely when we will get a one-year Budget statement. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 insists that a Budget statement should be provided to the Assembly and consulted on with the public by, I believe, the end of the financial year. That looks unlikely to happen now. That is profoundly disappointing, as it would be an opportunity to debate the priorities that the Executive and the Executive parties have set for themselves. We are not being unreasonable. We will never be unreasonable as an Opposition. All we will ask for is a robust, serious plan to rescue public services, because that is what the Executive parties and the Executive, including the Finance Minister and the First Minister and deputy First Minister, have promised.

I have a couple of points to make about the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024, if I may. I did not support and my party does not endorse this setting of the regional rate. As we have done in councils across the North, we have set out our view that we should seek to ease the burden on householders and small businesses where we can. We have acknowledged in a reasonable and constructive way that an incoming Executive have had to deal with that at relatively short notice.

It is worth pointing out a couple of things that, purely in a bureaucratic sense, could have been done much better. I will leave this with the Minister, and it came up at the Committee. First, the written ministerial statement that we received did not include a specific percentage increase on the regional rate. It set out a series of worked examples, if you like, for a property that is worth £123,000. It is clever to put it at £123,000, because that is significantly below the average house price in Northern Ireland, which would have been a more reasonable measure. In addition, the statement did not set out the percentage increase, which, to be honest, is a basic bit of information. It is the very least that we, as MLAs, should expect when a written ministerial statement sets out a percentage increase on the major tax that we vote on and levy. Guys, the tax that we are voting on now is, basically, the only substantial tax that we vote on. Therefore, what we are debating now is not just to be waved through. It is to be debated and scrutinised properly. The very least that we can expect in a written ministerial statement is the Minister and her officials to set down the actual percentage of increase rather than stating that it will simply be in line with inflation. Which measure of inflation? There are multiple different measures of inflation, and different pay negotiations are indexed to different levels of inflation, as are a range of taxes that are levied from Westminster. It is a basic thing that we be told what the percentage increase is and the level of inflation rather than just inflation in general.

This is a political point: I acknowledge that the increase is in line with inflation, which, clearly, is better than having an above-inflation increase. However, last year, when Chris Heaton-Harris went through a punishment Budget and the UK Government set a regional rate that was, at that time, below a measure of inflation — it was the only part of what they did in relation to the North that was less punishing — the now First Minister said that — *[Interruption.]* I did not think that what I said was that devastating, but, clearly, I am having more

of an impact than I expected. The now First Minister said:

"People are struggling with living costs, and shouldn't be burdened with increased rates".

The Minister might want to clarify that last year's rates increase was, in real terms, smaller than this year's. Although it was higher in percentage terms, it was lower in real terms. We need to front up and tell people that their rates are going up, albeit in line with inflation. That is different from last year.

I will make a couple of broader points about how we budget here. It is really important. We are in a position where there is — the Minister referred to it — a consultation ongoing on how the rating system works. Clearly, that rating system places a heavy burden on locally raised rates. It is, basically, the only tax in any substantive terms that we levy here. We do not yet know what the Executive's position is on revenue raising. We have heard different things. A letter from the Executive parties to the UK Government in London said, effectively, that they had started the work on revenue raising. However, that letter was subsequently disclaimed, denied or played down by different Executive parties. As a constructive Opposition, we have always said that, if there is a debate to be had about revenue raising, by all means, come back and tell us what it is, but the conditions that we, as the Opposition, will insist on are pretty reasonable. First, is it progressive? We are a left-of-centre party that believes in progressive taxation. Unlike the current Tory Government and other parties, including some on this island, we believe that the people who should bear the greatest burden of increased taxation are those who have the greater ability to pay. That is a reasonable principle.

The next principle about revenue raising is that it needs to be tied to improving public services. If we are to ask people to pay any greater taxation — that includes the rates that we are increasing today, by the way, which means an increase in everyone's bills: let us be clear about that. Everybody will pay more as a result of what we are doing today. Let us be clear with people: what will it be used for, and how will it be used to get waiting lists down or improve public services? Those are the tests by which we will judge any proposed rates increase. We will not accept any rates increase that simply puts an additional burden on working families and ordinary workers who are dealing with the cost-of-living crisis without even the vague promise of, let alone a properly costed plan for, improving public services.

Today's rates increase is not one that we will endorse. We will not push it to a Division, but, should it go to one, we will not endorse it. We cannot go on in a situation where we simply wave through tax increases and Budget Bills that will impose cuts on Departments and public services without being clear with the public about what we are doing or what the plan is for public service recovery. We have now been here for more than a month. We have had loads of motions from Executive parties that express aspiration. That is great. I am glad that we are setting big ambition and big aspiration. I am glad that we want to deal with school uniform costs. I want to deal with that, too. I am glad that we are debating workers' rights today. I want to deal with that, too, after a decade and a half of us falling behind on basic worker and employee rights. I am glad that we are debating a whole range of other things, including the burden of childcare that faces working families who get minimal support. I am glad that we are dealing with all of that, but, at a certain point, we will have to be honest with people about how we are planning to deal with all those things. All we have done is express aspiration. The two substantive pieces of legislation that we will have passed are, one, a Budget Bill that solidifies the cuts that were imposed by a Tory Government last year and, two, a regional rates order that will increase ordinary families' taxation.

Now, there are justifications that Ministers can give for that, but we should be honest with people that that is what we are doing, and we are not being honest yet. If Ministers feel that they have no choice, that is one thing, but they should at least be honest with people about when there is actually going to be a plan to rescue our public services and deliver on all the promises that have been made in the Chamber over the past month. That is not too much to ask, and that is what we, as a constructive Opposition, will continue to ask for in the days and weeks ahead.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. He makes a very valid and important point. Members of the public who are looking in on this place see the motions being debated and, obviously, the results of those debates and are interpreting them as actual changes to their reality. Does the Member agree that that is not entirely appropriate and that the public deserve honesty and actual intent from this place and delivery on that intent?

Mr O'Toole: The Member makes a very strong point. There are two key ways in which we can deliver positive public services.

Miss McAllister: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I will, in one second. The first is through passing legislation that actually changes people's lives, creates legal rights and creates burdens on public authorities. The second is by assigning money. We have not properly done either of those things yet, so we need to be careful about the message that we give to the public. I will give way to Nuala McAllister.

Miss McAllister: I take the Member's points about being honest. That is very important. We, in Alliance, have always been honest and realistic with the public. We are also ambitious as to where we can move forward. However, does the Member agree that there is still an opportunity, and there needs to be opportunities, not just to bring forward motions on issues that will not be fully funded — just as the SDLP did last week on Opposition day and will continue to do — but to put forward what policies there should be, so that we can actually enforce those policies as we move forward and can put our right foot where it should be, improving where we go in terms of policy, before we have consultation through the Executive and before Ministers are actually able to put their marker down, and that it is important that the House also debates those issues? If the Member does not agree, will he — *[Interruption]* — agree that the SDLP will no longer bring motions to the House but, rather, will bring forward legislation?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry. I remind Members that interventions should be short, not speeches.

Mr O'Toole: The Member made her point. I did not say, at any point, that no party should ever table a motion; we will be tabling lots of motions to be debated in the House. However, through the Chair, I remind the Member that her party is in the Executive; we are the Opposition. Parties that are in the Executive should have the honesty to tell the public what they are doing with the power that they have in the Executive and how they will use that power to change people's lives.

I totally agree that we can debate motions — we are all politicians and all enjoy debating things — but the test of any Government is what they do with the law and their spending power to change people's lives. That is a very reasonable question that we will be asking as the Opposition. I take the Member's point and totally agree with it; it is always useful to have a

debate in which we indicate our direction of travel and our aspirations. This afternoon, I will strongly agree with the Alliance Party's motion on integrated education, but my ask in that debate is that it is followed up by the Executive, with a solid plan to put back the ring-fencing of moneys for shared and integrated education that has been taken away, so that we follow that motion with practical action.

I have drifted away somewhat from the regional rates order, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, and I am sure that you are about to drag me back to it. I will simply say that we will not be endorsing today's regional rates order. It will not be for us to say whether it will go to a Division. I commend the Minister for coming to the Chamber even though she is feeling slightly under the weather. I hope that, the next time we debate anything fiscal, we have a little more detail on what the money is actually going to be used for.

Miss Brogan: I thank the Minister for bringing the regional rates order for 2024-25 to the Assembly. I appreciate the very tight time frame in which to issue rates bills to households in early April, as scheduled.

As Members will know, the regional rate is the only major tax that the Executive have control over. In the current financial year, Land and Property Services collected almost £1.5 billion in rates, which includes the district rate set by councils. The revenue generated by rates is used by the Executive and councils to deliver public services, including health, education, roads and waste management. Without the revenue generated by rates, the Executive would not be able to sustain our front-line public services, which people rely on every day.

12.00 noon

The cost-of-living crisis has had a devastating impact across society. So many families out there really struggle to pay the bills and put food on the table. Rising costs have also contributed to a much more difficult environment for businesses, with many shutting their doors. It is important that, as we debate striking a rate for the year ahead, we are mindful of the families and businesses that are struggling to survive.

The domestic and non-domestic poundage multiplier set out in the Rates Order for 2024-25 keeps the percentage increase in line with inflation, which sits at 4%. That level of increase strikes a good balance between ensuring the

delivery of sustainable public services and protecting the most vulnerable in society.

Prior to the restoration of the Assembly, the Secretary of State had threatened to impose a 15% rates hike as a means to raise £113 million. A rates increase of that magnitude would, undoubtedly, have plunged many businesses and many households into acute financial crisis. The Executive were right to resist calls from the Secretary of State to have unfair tax increases during a cost-of-living crisis. I thank the Finance Minister again for her steady leadership at this time.

Mr Frew: Certainly, I have been critical of the Opposition leader and the Opposition party's impact since we came back. However, today, it seems that the leader of the Opposition's words have shaken this place's very foundations, given the noise we heard.

I take the opportunity to wish the Finance Minister all the best and a speedy recovery from her illness. Well done to the Minister for making it to the Floor of the Assembly to move the order. It is not easy when you are down in the dumps and suffering from sickness, so well done, Minister.

The DUP supports the Rates Order, which limits the increase in rates in line with inflation, rather than providing the 15% increase sought by the UK Government. We do so not just because it is hard for our constituents to deal with an increase in the regional rate to that level in the context of a cost-of-lockdown crisis but because it would be wholly inappropriate for us to countenance an increase in revenue raising until such time as Northern Ireland, which is the first part of the UK to have been funded below need since the UK Government adopted the UK needs-based Holtham formula in 2012, is afforded the same protection as Wales to prevent funding below need. We are resolute and uncompromising in insisting that, given the extraordinary, dislocating and disruptive implications of being funded below need, it is imperative that, as the Barnett squeeze presses parts of the UK to need and thus the prospect and reality of funding slipping below need, we be afforded exactly the same protections as Wales has been granted in relation to that challenge.

We welcome the fact that the deal proposed by the Treasury at Hillsborough takes an important step forward in acknowledging that, in order to be funded to need in line with the Holtham formula, Northern Ireland must be funded to £124 per head, rather than the £120 per head of the last two years. In order for Northern

Ireland to be afforded the same protections as Wales in relation to need, Treasury must now increase our baseline funding to the same amount just above need, as it did in Wales when it intervened to prevent Welsh funding falling below need through the provision of, first, the uplift to slow down the impact of the Barnett squeeze and, secondly, the fiscal floor at the Holtham definition of need. There are two aspects to Holtham. If the people of Wales are worthy of being protected against their funding falling below need through the provision of an uplift and a fiscal floor, so are the people of Northern Ireland.

The current Hillsborough proposals, updated in the letter of 13 February from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to the Finance Minister, which we in the Committee have seen, deny Northern Ireland, first, the dignity of an uplift, which has been worth £1.17 billion to Wales between 2018 and 2024; and, secondly, the fiscal floor at need. The proposals instead offer a fiscal ceiling, and thus no uplift, and condemn us to being funded below the ceiling from 2026-27. When Treasury affords us the dignity of those two protections, only then should the Assembly consider going anywhere near increasing revenue. In doing so, it should be aware that Northern Ireland has the lowest taxable capacity in the UK, and that impacts on the definition of need. As the Fiscal Council noted about Northern Ireland:

"we estimate that adjusting for taxable capacity ... would increase the current NI relative need indicator from 124 to 127, in line with the [scale of the] increase previously estimated by the Holtham Commission".

Mindful of that, in a context in which we are not even properly funded to 124 from 2026-27, there can be no question of increased revenue raising until that matter is resolved.

In looking at revenue raising from the point of departure of suggesting that Northern Ireland rates are below those of GB, Treasury should get its facts right and recognise that the Northern Ireland business rate multipliers are higher than those in GB. The business rate multiplier for England in the coming year is 54.6; for Wales, it is 56.2; and, for Scotland, it is 54.5. For Northern Ireland, where the business rate is set partly by the district business rate, the average rate is 58.9681. In the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council area — in my constituency — it sits at 67.2415. In the Derry City and Strabane District Council area, it is 66.7608. That is a full 12 or 13 points higher than it is in Chris Heaton-Harris or Rishi

Sunak's constituencies. That means that Northern Ireland, with the lowest taxable capacity in the UK, is already more stretched in its taxable capacity with regard to the business rate than any other part of the UK, compounding greatly the need to ensure that we are funded to need before there can be any discussions or moves on revenue raising. Mindful of that, I ask the Minister what she is doing to hold the Treasury to the full Wales precedent, which is the provision of a fiscal floor to need and an uplift from 124.

Mr Tennyson: I add my well wishes to the Minister. I hope that she is feeling better soon. It is not easy to come to the Chamber when feeling unwell.

I support the order and believe that the proposed real-terms freeze in the regional rate, as informed by CPI inflation, goes some way to balancing the pressures faced by households and businesses but also by our public services.

There will no doubt be Members who will oppose any uplift. I invite any Members who make such an assertion to tell us how they propose to fund such an approach, because rates are vital for funding our public services, and the Executive have limited other powers to raise revenue.

This year's rate poundage has been the subject of fervent speculation and public commentary, particularly in the light of the conditions initially attached to the UK Government's financial package by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. The arbitrary and punitive revenue-raising target set out effectively translated to a 15% increase in the regional rate, given that no other revenue-raising lever could have been made operational in the unrealistic timeline prescribed by the Government.

Some have wrongly suggested that proceeding with the 15% increase would solve all our financial ills or that refusal to follow such a course of action is simply short-sighted or populist on the part of the Executive. Such assertions could not be further from the truth. Simply because the regional rate is the most immediately available lever to the Executive, it does not follow that it is necessarily the most progressive, fairest or best method of raising significant additional revenue. In fact, were we to rush to follow the approach of the Government and levy anything like a 15% increase, given the unprecedented cost-of-living and cost-of-doing-business pressures experienced over the past two years, it is likely that many would simply be put out of business. That would damage our economy, reduce our

rates base and set back efforts to deliver financial sustainability in the longer term. It would also make recovering the £175 million in unpaid rates from previous years all the more difficult. The UK Government know that. That is why, when the Secretary of State struck the rate poundage last year, he struck a below-inflation increase for domestic households and a freeze for non-domestic ratepayers. Elsewhere in the UK, significant reliefs have been made available to hospitality, leisure and retail. Those reliefs have not been replicated here.

It remains my party's view that an independent review of the rating system and associated reliefs is necessary to ensure that the system is progressive, supports our economic objectives and is fair. In Scotland, for example, the Barclay review made a raft of recommendations pertaining to ensuring that empty properties are reoccupied, that renewables are supported and, significantly, that relief is available to childcare providers. That is worthy of consideration, given that childcare has been highlighted as being a priority of all the parties in the Chamber. I would welcome the Minister's views on progressing with such a review. The Minister outlined the importance of regular revaluation for non-domestic ratepayers, but decisions are also urgently required in relation to domestic revaluation, and I would appreciate her outlining her plans for that.

We must be clear, however, that no amount of revenue raising, whether through the regional rate or by other means, will ever counteract the underfunding that Northern Ireland has been experiencing, which other Members have referred to. Nor will it counteract the reckless approach that Westminster has engaged in with regard to our public finances, with the spring Budget again prioritising tax cuts over much-needed investment in our public services. Rates is a small but nevertheless important part of the conversation, which is why I will support the order, but delivering financial sustainability will require a much wider approach that is both long-term and strategic. That must include the UK Government, having acknowledged that underfunding, moving to ensure that an equitable funding formula is put in place; updating the Executive's fiscal framework so that the Executive have appropriate powers to engage in progressive revenue raising; and that a Programme for Government is forthcoming that prioritises the stabilisation and transformation of our public services that is so desperately needed. I look forward to further constructive engagement on that with other parties, with colleagues and with the Minister.

Mr Allister: I detect a significant degree of grandstanding by the Executive in respect of the Rates Order. They trumpet the fact that they are retaining rates at inflation, but they are the same parties who, in our councils across Northern Ireland, voted well-above-inflation increases in the district rate. Few of them, if any — the exception, perhaps, being Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council — struck a district rate that was below inflation. Many of them struck a rate far in excess of inflation. Who voted those rates through? Members of the same parties who are in the Executive, who tell us that it is a virtue to grandstand at inflation rate when, for example, in Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, the DUP and the Alliance Party joined together to vote through a district increase of 9.78%, almost 10%.

It is pretty clear that there is a degree of grandstanding going on with a view to putting off the hard decisions. I forecast that that will be the trademark of this Executive: putting off hard decisions about financial matters. If, in the meantime, they can do a bit of Brit-bashing, so much the better as far as the Minister, her party and, sadly, her partners in government are concerned. They are learning and deploying a lot of Brit-bashing tricks from Sinn Féin. Mind you, all those parties tripped over themselves to get back in here with a financial package that they now decry as wholly inadequate. I remind the House that some of those parties were prepared to come back to the Assembly with no money on the table, such was their enthusiasm. Some of them were prepared to pay with their principles to be here.

12.15 pm

The district rate has been set to make a political point and not to deal with fiscal reality or responsibility.

The Executive are simply storing up more difficulties for themselves going forward. The Minister told us that the Treasury is now saying that the £113 million and the repayment of the overdrawn money can take place over a 24-month period. She was careful to not tell us whether that has been accepted by the Executive. She simply said that that was the offer. Perhaps, when she responds to the debate, she will indicate whether that is now an agreed position on the matter.

The Minister also told us that she was going to reinstate the Back in Business scheme, which is probably good, but she has not told us the net cost of that. We are increasing rates, according to need, apparently, but then we are

going to diminish them through various schemes. What is the net cost of the concessions that are being made and, therefore, what is the net income of the increase?

Where, in all of that scenario, is the frightening and truly shocking level of write-off of unpaid rates? Unpaid rates seem, with a shrug of the shoulders, to be simply written off far too easily. That raises a point of agitation for many constituents who struggle and are anxious to pay their rates but then read in the press that so many million pounds of unpaid rates have been written off. They rightly query that and say, "Why am I the fool paying my rates if many others just get them written off?". Where is the vigour and the rigour in reducing the unpaid rates in the Province, which would be a benefit to us all? Maybe the Minister can tell us what action programme she has to deal with the rates that are never paid, so that there might be greater equity for us all.

Mr Carroll: Dig deeper, dig deeper again, and, when you feel that you cannot dig any deeper into your pockets, dig deeper again. That is the message from the Executive: pay those extortionate rents, put up with the rate hikes and, essentially, shut up about it. That is the message, overwhelmingly, that is coming out loud and clear today for those who are struggling to make ends meet. That is what the new Executive are saying to those who can barely keep a roof over their heads and struggle to pay their bills.

When the institutions collapsed, Government parties were lining up at every opportunity to talk about those who could not heat their homes, small businesses and households that could not keep the lights on or people who could not feed their families or themselves and still struggle to do so. Today, those same parties are lining up to hike people's bills and force them into further poverty and further difficulty. We have heard all the excuses before.

Those who do the Tories' bidding — the bean counters — will have calculated this rates hike to the last penny. They will tell people that the average rates increase will be only so many pounds and pennies more every week or every year. They refuse to say that that is on top of the rates increases last year and the year before that, the year before that and the year before that. You get the picture: you see where we are going.

The Tory Secretary of State hiked the regional rate by 6% last year alone. On Belfast council, the parties that also sit in this Chamber hiked

domestic rates by 8%. Rents and mortgages are up, the price of the weekly shop is up and energy prices are still up. Wages are down in real terms and have been actively cut by the Executive parties. It does not take an economist to work out the impact of that on working-class people, whatever graph you want to use. Instead of doing something about it, Sinn Féin, the DUP and Alliance are once again punishing communities at the behest of the Tories and playing their game.

Of course, they have already told us and will continue to tell us that tough decisions have to be made when you are in government: I argue that they are taking the easy way out. The Executive think that it is easier to squeeze ordinary people and working-class families than to stand up to the Tories and their rich allies. They have once again accepted Tory austerity as the price of political power and are forcing the burden of revenue raising on hard-up households — struggling people who have had their rates raised year on year.

Nobody will deny that our public services are in urgent need of funding, but that could be easily addressed through progressive taxation that sees the wealthiest pay their fair share. It is a false proposition that rates hikes are the only way to fund public services. We need a new rates system that is based on income and profits. That, fundamentally, should be part of the conversation.

I heard a few days ago that public transport workers had overwhelmingly rejected the pitiful offer that the Executive foisted upon them. Those and other striking workers are best placed not only to win a proper pay rise but to shift the narrative about the funding of our public services. While they attack working-class people, the Executive have refused to lift a finger to challenge the wealthy. It is time to make the rich pay their way.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance to conclude the debate and make a winding-up speech.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Members who contributed to this important debate. As always, an interesting range of views were expressed.

As I stated, the 2024 order sets the regional rate for the forthcoming rating year. The Executive have aimed to strike a balance between meeting the needs of ratepayers and ensuring that public finances are sufficient to cover the priorities that we have set for ourselves.

I will pick up on some of the points that were made. The Chair of the Finance Committee made a number of points, including one about a recovery plan for the delivery of public services. The Executive have committed to developing a sustainability plan. I did not mention in my opening comments that the Treasury indicated that it would like to see that sustainability plan by the beginning of May. We made the case to Treasury that that time frame for the development of the plan was unrealistic, so it agreed to an extended timeline. We see the plan as important for setting out the Executive's priorities and budgeting to meet those priorities.

The Committee Chair also mentioned the average house price. The average house price in 2024 is not the same as the average capital value, which is what I referred to. The £123,000 that I referred to is not the current average market value of a house but its rateable value.

I acknowledge the point that the Chair made about poundages not being referred to in the ministerial statement, but I will flag the fact that the poundage was in the order that was laid in the Assembly Business Office at the same time as the ministerial statement was made.

The Chair mentioned the progressiveness of the rating system. The Executive's domestic rate applies discrete individual capital values to each property. That is more progressive than a council tax, which operates on a crude banded system. Likewise, non-domestic rates operate on the basis of rental values, which are revalued more frequently here than they are in England, Scotland or Wales.

I thank Mr Frew for his kind comments. He is not here at the minute. I agree with his points about the necessity of our being properly funded to the level of need and about how we need to look at the level of need and the 124% that the Treasury has referred to. Many of the parties in the Chamber have argued for a higher level, so we obviously want to look at that. I acknowledge his points about rate poundages, and I have a couple of comments on them. First, the Member will be aware that rate poundage is only one part of the rates calculation and that it needs to be applied to local rental values, which track the local market. My officials have been in discussion with Ulster University — I think that I mentioned that at Question Time — about conducting research into the impact of poundage differentials across councils.

I will pick up on Eóin's point about potentially putting rates too high and the impact that that would have. I completely agree with him. If we

had put rates up to a punitive level, we would have run the risk of businesses being under so much pressure to pay that it could have put people out of business, put jobs at risk and increased the risk of additional debt.

I will turn to some of the points made by Mr Allister and Mr Carroll. I need to point out that the issue today relates to the regional rate element only. That is what the Executive and Assembly have set, and I hope that Assembly Members will support that today. Local government finances itself, and the area in which the district rate falls is a matter for the Minister for Communities. I am prepared to work with the Minister and the Executive on any concerns about that. We have only a notional cost for the Back in Business scheme, because what we are doing with that is trying to get more businesses into properties and then have them paying additional rates. The rural ATM scheme costs less than £50,000.

I trust that Members will show the necessary support for the order today. I believe that the inflationary increase in the regional rate will be understood by the public. It is clear that the Executive have acknowledged the need to raise revenue but that it is expected that we do that in a progressive and sustainable way. I commend the order to the Assembly and ask Members to affirm it.

Madam Principal Deputy 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 the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 be affirmed.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Members will take their ease.

Private Members' Business

Workers' Rights

Ms Ennis: On a point of order, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. The Minister of Finance is due to respond to the debate on behalf of the Minister for the Economy. As per the last debate, she will follow the debate from her room.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

I call Declan Kearney to move the motion.

Mr Kearney: The overarching economic model —.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry, Declan, you need to move the motion, and then I will open the debate.

Mr Kearney: I beg to move

That this Assembly stands in solidarity with workers and trade unions in their campaign to improve workers' rights and conditions; acknowledges the insecurity that workers face due to precarious working arrangements such as zero-hours contracts, fire and rehire practices and bogus self-employment; recognises the importance of supporting work-life balance, access to paid carer's leave, and entitlement to tips and gratuities for workers; believes that increased trade union membership and recognition is vital to improving workers' rights and conditions; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to continue to work to bring forward new employment legislation to address these issues and to support and protect workers.

12.30 pm

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. As an amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List, the Business Committee has agreed that 15 minutes will be added to the total time for the debate. I have been advised that the Finance Minister will respond to the debate.

Mr Kearney: The overarching economic model that we live within has become a byword for workforce and workplace inequalities and exploitation. The motion highlights the nature of some of the most systemic inequalities that exist today, such as a lack of access to paid carer's leave, the lack of entitlement to keep tips and gratuities, fire and rehire practices, and bogus self-employment scams. My party accepts the amendment that is presented by the DUP. We feel that it is a helpful contribution to the scope of the motion.

The motion also extends solidarity to all workers and families and the trade union movement in their campaigns to improve workers' rights, terms and conditions. The race-to-the-bottom approach throughout Ireland has created what the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) has described in its policy paper 'No Going Back' as:

"an economic crisis that is qualitatively different to any other recession in modern times."

We all know, see and even experience the repercussions of the current cost-of-living crisis. The living standards that were once viewed as denoting relative affluence have now become the characteristics of the working poor. Those who are enduring precarious work have become described as the "precarariat". The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has appealed to us all, North and South, to rethink our approach to dealing with those issues and to reconsider and embrace policies that were previously rejected as, perhaps, politically impossible. This is a time for new thinking. Continuing to recycle and use the same policy processes in the expectation of different results is a recipe for more of the same. A paradigm shift is required towards economic and industrial strategy and employment relations in this region.

The starting point for how to do so is contained in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. We need a new deal for workers and families. Those who suffer the indignity of wage inequality, poor working conditions and discrimination at work, and are pushed to the margins of society, are young people, women and disabled people. They are our family members, friends and neighbours. They are the essential front-line workers, who give most and get least in return. A new deal needs to be negotiated for all of them. That is possible. It can be done through social dialogue between the Irish congress, employers, Ministers and the Assembly; a properly structured tripartite model of engagement that conforms to the international definitions and standards that are

set down by the International Labour Organization. That has been codified in 'Democracy at Work', which was launched here just last week. I commend that document to all Members and parties in the Assembly. It points towards a step change, which, if implemented, will work for all in society.

That change must also extend to changing the financial model by which the region is funded in order to also guarantee the delivery of good, sustainable, proper public services. Collectively, we must campaign for and secure a financial settlement that allows the reversal of historic underinvestment and the consequences of Tory austerity in the North. We must also begin to imaginatively and strategically engage with how the island economy, North/South implementation bodies and the North/South Ministerial Council itself can become new drivers for economic growth and productivity on the basis of good employment and working conditions.

The motion seeks to unlock a new economic debate about a different approach to industrial and employment relations, but that discussion is not an end in itself. It needs to become a process, involving our Assembly Chamber, scrutiny Committees and Executive Ministers, which widens out to and maximises popular participation. If we embrace that discussion as a shared opportunity, the end can take the form of a public policy framework and Programme for Government that conform to democratic equality, needs-based outcomes and, most importantly, a political and policy consensus that puts the priorities of workers and families in this place at the heart of our political institutions.

Mr Brett: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "paid carers" and insert:

"and miscarriage leave, and entitlement to tips and gratuities for workers; believes that the support of businesses, including through good employment practices and charters, in addition to increased trade union membership and recognition, is vital to improving workers' rights and conditions; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to continue to work to bring forward new employment legislation to address these issues and to support and protect workers."

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Phillip. You have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to wind up the debate on the amendment. All other Members who speak will

have five minutes. Please open the debate on the amendment.

Mr Brett: I am delighted to contribute to this important debate. I congratulate the Member for South Antrim on proposing a motion on this important issue, and I thank him and his party colleagues for accepting our amendment. To be clear, I make these remarks in my capacity as DUP economy spokesperson and not in my role as Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy. Our amendment seeks to improve the motion that is before the House and to cover additional areas, and it should be able to command the support of all parties. I will focus on the additional elements included in our amendment before moving on to the motion proposed by Mr Kearney.

Our amendment seeks the introduction of legislation on miscarriage leave and pay in Northern Ireland. The loss of a pregnancy is a source of profound sorrow and grief for any family. Employment law should be compassionate towards and supportive of those who face such circumstances. Working parents who experience a stillbirth after 24 weeks of pregnancy have a statutory entitlement to two weeks' leave and pay, thanks to the actions of the House and Members in the previous mandate. I congratulate them on that.

I believe, however, that a worker who experiences a miscarriage up to the end of 23 weeks of pregnancy should be afforded the same protections. Those views were shared by the previous Minister for the Economy, Minister Lyons, who launched a public consultation on the proposals in October 2022. Importantly, those proposals contained a clear new right, which would come into effect from day 1 of employment for employees and mean that no minimum period of employment would be needed before the statutory payment would be available to them.

Those measures will, of course, in no way compensate for the loss and grief of a family who experience a miscarriage, but they would enable a worker to start the grieving process without the additional burden of financial concerns. Northern Ireland could be the first region of the United Kingdom and one of the first countries on the entire planet to place such protections and entitlements for workers and employees who experience a miscarriage on a statutory footing. I would welcome hearing the Minister's thoughts on those proposals when she responds to the debate on behalf of the Economy Minister. I associate myself with the remarks wishing her a speedy recovery.

Secondly, our amendment also seeks to recognise that good employment practices exist in Northern Ireland and that the tools are in place to strengthen those measures, as set out in the 10X Economy strategy and the skills strategy by former Ministers Diane Dodds and Gordon Lyons. I think that I speak for the whole House when I say that we are, rightly, proud of the SME sector in Northern Ireland, which makes up the vast majority of our private sector. In many cases, such family-owned, locally grown companies have the rights of their employees at the heart of their organisation and their business goals. Those businesses rightly recognise that their talented staff are the heart of their organisation and that, by having motivated and healthy staff, productivity is increased. That has resulted in many good examples of business and employee practices. I am sure that, like me, when Members visit companies across their constituency, they are blown away by the passion of the staff in those organisations to grow the local economy and work together. Those practices can, of course, be strengthened by good employment charters, as referenced in our amendment. That concept was endorsed by the 10X skills strategy and was incorporated in its delivery plan.

The Labour Relations Agency (LRA) has described the key pillars of what a good employment charter for Northern Ireland might look like: job and income security; pay, in that employers would commit, when they can, to paying at least the voluntary living wage and to providing an occupational sick pay scheme that goes beyond the statutory minimum; inclusive and fair recruitment practices, with equality and diversity issues integral to them; health and well-being, by which I mean the commitment of leadership to developing a culture in which employees can take ownership of their individual role in order to create a healthy and productive workplace; employers' prioritisation of flexible working, when possible; and engagement and voice, whereby employers engage positively with trade unions and ensure the involvement of employees in the decision-making process. Given the all-encompassing nature and clear benefits of such charters, I would welcome the Minister's views on their continuation and expansion in Northern Ireland.

I associate myself with many of the elements included in Mr Kearney's motion. To make our economy more productive and more prosperous, we have to make work more attractive. Sectors such as hospitality are desperate for workers. Although we need to do more to ensure that people are ready, we also need to ensure that they are not penalised for working. On these Benches, we wholeheartedly

support ending the disparity with GB over new protections against employers withholding tips and gratuities from staff. New employment protections have recently been enacted in Great Britain, including new legal rights for parents of children requiring neonatal care; the right to unpaid leave for employees with caring responsibilities; protection for workers who receive tips; and increased rights for employees. All those rights have recently been returned to the statute book in Great Britain. Those disparities between here and the rest of the UK should and must be addressed by the Assembly if we are to have an effective and fair employment relations framework in Northern Ireland.

There are, of course, also areas in which we can drive change within the confines of what the Assembly has already legislated for. Enacting regulations need to be brought forward to bolster gender-gap payment reporting and, in my view, to introduce safe leave for victims of domestic abuse. I would welcome the Minister's thoughts when she responds later today.

It is significant that, although Northern Ireland has a higher female full-time employment rate than most UK regions, our overall female employment participation rate is the lowest in all of the United Kingdom. That is why the Programme for Government and any legislative programme that the Executive agree must make childcare a policy development headline statement.

The days of "any work is good work" are now over. It is crucial that inclusion and sustainable working practices and conditions be front and centre of the Department for the Economy's future plans.

To conclude, I record my thanks to a number of —.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brett: Of course.

Mr Allister: Before the Member concludes, I would like to get some clarification on the issue of zero-hours contracts. When we last debated the matter, on 31 January 2022, his party, through Mr Peter Weir and, if I recall correctly, Gordon Lyons, were supportive of the principle of zero-hours contracts but accepted that the issue of exclusivity needed to be dealt with. Has the Member's position now changed to one of, as the motion suggests, opposition in its totality to zero-hours contracts?

Mr Brett: I thank Mr Allister for the question. As he says, our party recognised the difficulties with that issue. There are people for whom, given their circumstances, zero-hours contracts suit their requirements. As Mr Allister rightly points out, however, we do not want any worker to be exploited either. It is therefore about finding a balance, and that is the position that I hold.

Before Mr Allister made that point, I had wanted to put on the record my thanks to a number of organisations that have been in touch with me and, I am sure, other Members to highlight important issues for the debate. Carers NI has been to the fore in championing paid leave for carers, and its work has been vital in that regard. The TinyLife charity does tremendous work for families right across Northern Ireland.

Its focus on ensuring paid leave for neonatal care is something that, I think, the whole House greatly supports. I thank the trade unions, which, across Northern Ireland, continue to engage in positive discussions to try to find a resolution to the current public-sector pay dispute. I also thank employers across Northern Ireland that continue to drive our economy forward in good practice.

I commend our amendment to the Assembly and hope that Northern Ireland can be a leading example of delivering workers' rights here as a key part of the United Kingdom market.

Ms Eastwood: I support the motion and the amendment and thank the Members who tabled them. I declare that I previously worked in HR and employment law and was a member of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW).

Obviously, employment law is devolved in Northern Ireland, but, to be brutally honest, over the past seven-odd years, Northern Ireland has fallen well behind on workers' rights and the protections provided to workers in comparison with both GB and south of the border. It is important that the Minister introduces legislation urgently, as we cannot wait for workers in Northern Ireland to have the same rights as those in the rest of the UK or in the South. I also pay tribute to my colleague Dr Stephen Farry, the former Minister for Employment and Learning, who ensured that Northern Ireland was protected from the worst elements of some of the draconian laws brought in under the Tory Administration. Indeed, I have most recently asked the Minister for the Economy whether he has any intention of introducing, for example,

the minimum service level laws. He said that he does not, which I welcome.

Mr Declan Kearney, who moved the motion, talked about the precariat; indeed, that speaks to the main body of the motion. We have seen massive changes in our economy over the past 10 years, and that has spoken to the people who are in those forms of unsafe, often casual working that are both exploitative and damaging to our economy. We support laws that seek to protect workers. We support people who are working in the likes of Carers NI, TinyLife, Legal Island, the Equality Commission NI, the Human Rights Commission and others, who are seeking to make sure that workers have the same protections in law as they do elsewhere.

I look to the Equality Act 2010 that was made in GB, and I look at some of the different pieces of legislation that we derive in seeking to protect workers in the North. There is definitely a lot more that can be done to tidy up the legislation that we use here to protect workers. For example, I look at the most recent developments in GB and see a new duty on employers to take reasonable steps to prevent the sexual harassment of employees in the course of their employment; new rights to carers' leave and neonatal leave, which others mentioned; an extension of protection for employees in health and safety cases; changes in the calculation of compensation for discrimination awards; collective redundancy consultation changes; a day-1 right to a written statement of terms and conditions for all workers; the introduction of new flexible working rights; the extension of redundancy protections to pregnant women; and a new statutory right to request predictable working patterns from employers. The lack of those workers' rights has serious real-world consequences for workers and their families in Northern Ireland. For example, the lack of workplace rights for carers drives many from the workplace and leads to burnout and financial struggles. We support Carers NI and its lobbying for a change in the law, and we note that one in three people with caring roles are leaving work, so we need to act urgently.

Public interest disclosure legislation is an area that needs to be updated. Rights and responsibilities in relation to public interest disclosures are contained in the Public Interest Disclosure (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. I encourage the Economy Minister to consider lessons that could be learnt from the Government consultation on the GB whistle-blowing framework and the additional requirements through the EU whistle-blowing directive.

Something that is not referenced in the motion is gender pay gap reporting, which Mr Brett, as Chair of the Economy Committee, referenced. We need to recognise that there are powers already there to at least partly address it. If the First Minister and deputy First Minister were willing to use them, they could bring section 19 of the Employment Act 2016 into force. The Act provides for the making of gender pay gap reporting regulations, which should have been in place by 2017. However, given the delay in implementing these, the gender pay gap reporting regulations should go further and, as in the South, apply to employers with 50 or more employees, not just to those with over 250 employees. I mention that because, as others have referenced, Northern Ireland is predominantly an SME economy. Therefore, we want to make sure that, when we are going out of our way to strengthen workers' rights, we monitor and do that in a way that reflects our economy.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Eastwood: I will indeed.

Mr Allister: I will ask the same clarification question of the Alliance Party on zero-hour contracts. In the days when he was a Minister, Dr Stephen Farry held a consultation on zero-hour contracts and concluded that they should not be banned but that their exclusivity should be reformed. Is that still the Alliance Party's position, or, in supporting the motion, is it now pursuing the abandonment of zero-hour contracts?

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

Ms Eastwood: I thank the Member for his intervention. Obviously, the issue of zero-hours contracts impacts on us all. Indeed, we note that the use of zero-hours contracts is predominant in areas with a lack of gender equality, such as health and social care, hospitality and other areas of employment. We want to make sure that the use and exploitation of zero-hours contracts come to an end. We do not hesitate to tell the Member that we intend to make sure that those exploitative forms of working come to an end. We are delighted to make sure that we have the best forms of employment for workers in the North.

We want to make sure that Alliance plays its full part —

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

Ms Eastwood: — in protecting workers. We look forward to working with the Economy Minister to do that in the months ahead.

Dr Aiken: I must apologise: like the Finance Minister, I am rather croaky today. As my spluttering continues, I shall keep my remarks blissfully short.

First, I declare an interest. I am a proud member of Unite the Union, and I fully support what it is trying to do, particularly when dealing with the challenges of zero-hours contracts and the diminution of workers' rights across Northern Ireland and all of our United Kingdom.

The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion and the amendment. The Ulster Unionist Party has been clear — we have been on a bit of a journey — that the most important thing about zero-hours contracts is that they undermine the labour market; in fact, they work against what they were originally set up to do. By removing workers' rights, we make our labour market much less responsive to the needs of Northern Ireland. When zero-hours contracts are being utilised by not just what we used to consider the low-wage economy but the medium-wage economy, we see everyone from airline pilots all the way down to people who are working in hospitality and other sectors experiencing the problems with those contracts. Something has to be done about that across our nation. Somewhere in the United Kingdom, we should set down the necessary aims and objectives to make sure that we are pushing away from zero-hours contracts to strengthen workers' rights. If we cannot do that in our part of the United Kingdom, I do not know where we can, because we have the flexibility and the ability to do it.

I will talk more widely about some of the other rights. Many MLAs who are involved in the trade union movement get a chance to talk to the trade unions across the board about some of the key issues. The issue is not just the sense that rights are being undermined; there is a sense that not having trade union recognition is beginning to undermine not only people's ability to work in the labour force but their ability to adjust and move for better pay and conditions. The issue of conditions is important because, as has been pointed out by other Members, we must focus on issues like parental rights and bereavement rights. However, we must make sure that our workers believe that the Assembly has their backs. We must ensure that we are in a position where we can support our workforce. We want Northern

Ireland to work. We want to see growth across the sectors, but to do that we need our workforce to feel valued.

The Economy Minister is either in Washington or on his way there. When he gets there, one of the things that they will be talking about is selling Northern Ireland as a great place to do business in the United Kingdom and selling those accesses. One of the things that many companies talk about time and again is the fact that we are seen as a relatively low-wage economy. We should be seen not as a low-wage economy but as a skilled economy. People want to come because our workforce is the best. They have the skills and the ability. We should not undersell ourselves, but, more importantly, we should not undersell our workforce. That is why the Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion and the amendment.

I am sorry for my croaking, Principal Deputy Speaker. You will hear from me later, when, hopefully, I will be a bit better.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The debate will continue after Question Time, and the next Member to be called will be Sinéad McLaughlin. Sinéad, you will get your full five minutes. If I had brought you in now, I would have had to cut you off. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.56 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Communities

Childcare: Anti-poverty Strategy

1. **Ms Nicholl** asked the Minister for Communities what engagement he has had with the Minister of Education on the role of high-quality, affordable childcare in delivering the anti-poverty strategy. (AQO 161/22-27)

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities):

Addressing poverty in all its forms is a key priority for me. Poverty is a complex and multifaceted issue, and I am considering the work to date on the development of the Executive's anti-poverty strategy.

My officials have engaged with officials from all Departments, including the Department of Education, in the development of the strategy so far. I have had discussions with the Minister of Education on childcare and, in particular, on the relationship between the anti-poverty strategy and the childcare strategy, and I will work closely with him to progress both of those important pieces of work.

There are clear links between the two strategies. My Executive colleagues and I will seek to ensure alignment of approach between the strategies in addressing the issues faced by children and their parents, with a view to ensuring that all parents who want to work are enabled to do so. I am committed to developing solutions to tackle poverty in the here and now. I do not want to produce a strategy that will just sit on a shelf. To that end, my focus will be on working with my Executive colleagues to develop a sustainable, deliverable anti-poverty strategy that prioritises the issues that will make a tangible difference to people's lives.

Ms Nicholl: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that childcare cost support, under universal credit, is available only if you are in work or about to start work. What is his assessment of whether support could be made available to parents and carers who have disabilities or medical needs that prevent them from accessing support for childcare costs?

Mr Lyons: The Member is correct. Universal credit awards can include a childcare element in the calculation of the benefit award, and that can provide up to 85% reimbursement of the eligible amount that the customer claims. The current maximum limits are £950.91 for one child and £1,630.15 for two or more children.

She is correct to say that the claimant must be in paid work, employed or self-employed, or about to start work.

The difficulty for the Department comes if there is divergence from the rest of the United Kingdom. That is where the extra costs come in. However, I am aware of the issues around the specific question that the Member raised, and additional support will be available for carers who find themselves in that position. In the case of a child with a disability, an extra monthly payment is available to help with the extra costs of bringing up a disabled child, and the disabled child addition will be paid at a lower or higher rate. The lower rate is £146.31 a month for a child who receives any rate of either part of disability living allowance (DLA), except the highest rate of care part, or receives any rate of either personal independence payment (PIP), except the enhanced rate of the daily living part. The higher rate, £456.89, is for a child who receives the highest rate of the care part of DLA. As well as that, there is the universal credit carer's addition of £185 extra a month if the person tells us that they are caring for a severely disabled person.

Mr Gildernew: Minister, will you give us a commitment to factor in the recommendations of the Comptroller and Auditor General's report on child poverty, which was issued today, before finalising the anti-poverty strategy?

Mr Lyons: The Member will be aware that that report has only just been published today, and I will want to take time to consider its findings and to get fully briefed by officials on that issue. I recognise that a number of concerns have been expressed in relation to the report. We will not have a child poverty strategy in the future, as that will be rolled into the anti-poverty strategy, but, of course, it is absolutely right that we take time to consider that and look at the learning that can be taken from it. It is important that we do that and that we go out and try to ensure that we have a strategy that works and will actually deliver the change that we want to see, and that includes taking learning from all quarters.

Ms Brownlee: Does the Minister agree that the key to tackling poverty is getting people into work and ensuring that there is affordable, accessible childcare available for parents to do so?

Mr Lyons: The Member will not be surprised to hear me say that I agree with her that those who can work should be supported into work, and that means that we need to break down

barriers to get people into employment. There are a number of barriers that people face as they try to enter the workplace. The Member has rightly identified childcare as one of those barriers. I am keen for the Executive to address that issue. She will be aware that the Education Minister takes primary responsibility for and is committed to addressing it. My Department will, of course, have a role to play. We will be part of the task and finish group on the childcare policy proposals.

Of course, that is not the only issue that we need to address. Disability is another barrier. There are low levels of employment among those with a disability. I want to make sure that we do everything that we can to ensure that a disability does not prohibit somebody from getting into the workplace. Some excellent work has already been done in that regard.

It is also important that people have access to training and the skills that they need to succeed. All of that will require a cross-departmental approach and genuine joined-up working so that we can tackle poverty in all its forms in Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister: How does the Minister think that those who need a fully funded childcare scheme and, indeed, other strategies would feel if the Executive were to prioritise tens of millions more for Casement Park while such strategies go underfunded?

Mr Lyons: The Member will be aware that there are a number of outstanding issues in relation to the redevelopment of Casement Park. There has been an Executive commitment from 2011 to provide £62.5 million for that redevelopment. However, I completely agree with those who say that we also need to see our public services funded properly and a childcare strategy in place that delivers the change that is needed in order for people to be able to get into work and not be burdened by the cost of childcare. That is what I and my party are committed to doing, and we look forward to achieving it during this term.

Mr McNulty: Minister, what conversations have you had with the Department of Education and the Minister there about the reality faced by hard-working couples who, crippled with the burden of hiking childcare costs, are having to make, or have made, the decision that either the mother or the father will stop working? What advice would you give them?

Mr Lyons: As I indicated in my original answer to Ms Nicholl, the Education Minister and I have

had conversations about childcare. As I said, it is primarily the responsibility of the Department of Education, but it is a cross-cutting issue. I am determined that my Department plays its role in delivering much-needed help. There is no disagreement among the Executive parties about the need to get that done and get it done quickly. We know that it can be a major game changer for people in Northern Ireland and, as we have discussed, has the ability to get people into work. I am fully committed to playing my role in that. We will certainly listen to stakeholders and parents and come up with what we can to provide real and meaningful help to people in Northern Ireland.

Flooding: Financial Support

2. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for Communities whether he will bring forward a dedicated financial support scheme to assist homeowners who have been severely impacted by recent flooding. (AQO 162/22-27)

Mr Lyons: As I advised at Question Time on 20 February, the scheme of emergency financial assistance (SEFA) was introduced by the Executive in 2007. Its purpose is to provide immediate financial support to households that have suffered from flooding. It is not a compensation scheme, nor does it purport to be one, and it is not intended to replace or displace the assistance that households should receive from their insurers. An immediate payment of £1,000 was made by district councils to provide eligible householders with assistance to make their homes habitable as quickly as possible. In the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area, assistance was provided to 119 households during the flooding event in October 2023. No further payments can be made available under the SEFA. My Department can work only within the guidelines that are available at this time.

I recognise that there is an issue of concern, especially for people whose homes have been flooded in the past, and the difficulty that there can be in securing flood insurance. Flood Re is a joint initiative between the UK Government and insurers that will run until 2039. That programme exists to improve the availability and affordability of flood insurance for people who live in properties in flood-risk areas.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for his answer. Although I am probably like a broken record at this stage, and I understand the information that has been provided, I cannot stress strongly enough how critical the situation is. I ask the Minister to please consider a

bespoke scheme that will deliver for families that have not been able to access flood insurance and are trying to rebuild their homes but have not been able to do so. It is a critical situation. I ask the Minister to strongly reconsider that.

Mr Lyons: The Member will understand that my hands are tied in many ways here insofar as I can operate only within the scheme that is currently available. I have huge sympathy for those who find themselves in the position that she described. On average, it costs between £40,000 and £50,000 to repair and refurbish a home that has been damaged by flooding. That is very hard on the householder but, unfortunately, it is not a cost that my Department is able to absorb at this time.

I really encourage the Member to make her constituents who have been affected aware of the Flood Re scheme. A levy is taken from all insurance payments in the UK, and that can go towards helping people in those areas and people who have faced this difficulty in the past. The Assembly is not in a position to step in and provide the sort of cover that otherwise would be covered by insurance.

Mr Middleton: Over the past number of years, there have been several significant flooding incidents across the Foyle constituency. Will the Minister indicate how much his Department has paid out within the Londonderry and Strabane District Council area over the past five years?

Mr Lyons: Yes, I can. In the Londonderry and Strabane District Council area, there were payments of £14,000 in 2019-2020, £19,000 in the following year, £15,000 in the following year, £156,000 in 2022-23 and £23,000 the year after that. That is just the support that was given through this particular scheme.

I want to put on record my thanks to those in his local council area who did so much to help people who were affected during that time. The Member will be aware of how the local community came together and how the council provided support on top of that provided through the Department. I know, because of connections that I have in the Eglinton area, that local churches and community groups, in particular, came together to provide support.

The Department is unable to provide all the help, support and funding that is required in a situation like this, but I am pleased that, over the past number of years, we have been able to provide £227,000 of support to help those who

find themselves in immediate need. That will continue.

Mr McGrath: Will the Minister consider evaluating that scheme and its effectiveness, given the increased incidence of flooding and that floods are happening in places that have not experienced them before, such as Cathedral View and Cathedral Park in Downpatrick where my constituents are now being hit with very high insurance premiums even though their houses were not flooded?

Mr Lyons: I hope that the Member, too, will make his constituents aware of the Flood Re scheme, which can be of benefit to them in the situation in which they find themselves.

Any change to that scheme is likely to incur additional costs, for which no budget is available at the moment. Any change to widen the application of the scheme is likely to impact on its value-for-money assessment and to be repercussive. It would therefore need to be fully tested via an appropriate business case, and no further work has been done on that.

2.15 pm

The Member raises important points about how often these flooding events happen and about how they are now happening in places where they did not happen before. The Assembly and the Executive have a responsibility to make sure that there is investment where it can make a difference, such as through flood defences and preventative work. I will support the Department for Infrastructure in doing that. I would be quite happy if my Department were not to pay anything out from the fund owing to its not being needed, but, if it is the case that it is needed, we will need an awful lot of investment.

Queen's Parade, Bangor: Regeneration

3. **Ms Egan** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the regeneration of Queen's Parade, Bangor. (AQO 163/22-27)

Mr Lyons: My officials have been working closely with Ards and North Down Borough Council and the developer, Bangor Marine, to bring forward plans for the development of the site by way of a development agreement. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to officials from the Department for Communities who have worked very hard on this over many years.

The Bangor Marine team is working through the pre-commencement planning conditions. In tandem with that, discussions continue with the Crown Estate about securing the necessary approvals for elements of the project that will be located on Crown Estate land. Bangor Marine has started to clear trees and shrubbery from the Marine Gardens part of the site, in advance of the nesting season, to accommodate the commencement of the construction of the public realm works, which are programmed to begin later this year. That will provide an economic boost to the wider Ards and North Down economy through increased tourism, city-centre living and increased employment opportunities.

Ms Egan: Thank you, Minister. The Queen's Parade site in Bangor has been derelict since before I was born. People in Bangor are very keen to see the regeneration happen. Unfortunately, the project has been plagued by delays. On your Department's website, it is stated that works were expected to start in summer 2023. When can we expect building to take place? Can you give the people of Bangor hope that you will prioritise the project?

Mr Lyons: I always hope that I can give the people of Bangor hope. Hopefully, I will do that in many ways in the remainder of my time in office. I completely understand the frustration over the site. As the Member indicated, this has been going on for many decades. I know that people in the area have wanted to see the site progress for a long time. She will be aware of the negotiations that I mentioned with the Crown Estate. Those negotiations have been somewhat protracted. They have gone on a lot longer than any of us would have liked them to and, as a result, could push back the planned start date of this summer. The Member will, however, be aware of the works that have taken place so far, and I can give her an assurance that the issue will be pushed forward by my Department so that the regeneration happens as quickly as possible.

I am delighted that I will very soon be visiting the site to see for myself the work that is going to be done. It was on my first or second day in office that Mr Dunne extended an invitation to me to visit it, so I look forward to seeing the potential that is there. It could be an absolute game changer, bringing significant economic and social benefits for the people of Bangor and, indeed, more widely.

Mr Chambers: I welcome the Minister's comments. Have any time limits been incorporated into the contract with the

developer to ensure that the project's various stages are completed on time?

Mr Lyons: I am not aware of any hard and fast dates having been included to ensure that the work is completed. The target date is spring 2027, and I certainly hope that the work can be progressed and finished. As I said in my answer to Ms Egan, I will do everything that I can, where my Department has responsibility, to make sure that the project is moved on as quickly as possible. I understand the benefits that it can bring, and I want people to enjoy those benefits as soon as possible.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Minister provide an update on the regeneration of Strabane town centre and what progress has been made on the public realm scheme?

Mr Lyons: Yes. This is another area that has been some time in the making. The Strabane public realm project is at the business case stage and is now scheduled for casework committee consideration within my Department. There have been a number of iterations of the business case, and my officials have been working closely with Londonderry and Strabane District Council in getting the business case finalised for casework consideration over the past months. The project is of a scale that will require my approval as well as the Department of Finance's approval. In consideration of the project, I will want to consider the budget requirements alongside other capital funding priorities within my Department.

No-fault Evictions: Legislative Ban

4. **Mr Tennyson** asked the Minister for Communities whether he will introduce legislation to ban no-fault evictions. (AQO 164/22-27)

Mr Lyons: Phase 1 of my Department's programme of private rented sector reform already includes work to improve security of tenure through the introduction of much longer notice to quit periods via the Private Tenancies Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. The Act also specifies that regulations on exemptions must be in place before these longer notice periods are commenced. This is because, without such exemptions, the legislation would be susceptible to challenges under article 1 of the first protocol of the Human Rights Act 1998 with regard to interference "to control the use of property". My officials have taken on board the views of stakeholders and are developing a robust equality impact assessment to inform the drafting of these regulations, with consultation

planned in the coming months. In parallel, I am considering what phase 2 of the private rented sector reform programme should include. I am conscious that the reform programme began with a review that is now over eight years old, so I have asked my officials to re-engage with key stakeholders to refresh our thinking on what the most impact on improving the safety, security and standards of the private rented sector could be.

Mr Tennyson: The Minister will be aware that almost 2,900 households presented as homeless due to loss of rented accommodation in 2022-23, which was a 17% increase on the previous year. As part of his consideration, is the Minister looking to Scotland around indefinite tenancy, and does he agree that any exemptions need to be tightly defined so that renters do not find themselves at the mercy of unscrupulous landlords?

Mr Lyons: The priority for the Department is to implement and put in place the changes that were made and requested by the Assembly in 2022 with the Act that went through the House. Any further work will be given due consideration in time. However, I understand the concerns that the Member has. In England and Wales, where they have moved to that no-fault eviction ban, there are quite a few and, indeed, a growing number of exemptions to that. The Department and the House will need to be very careful in any move towards that. We all want the right outcome for our constituents, and that will be all taken into consideration.

Mr Bradley: Does the Minister agree that it is disgraceful if landlords use notices to quit instead of addressing complaints from tenants, such as damp, mould and necessary repairs?

Mr Lyons: Yes, I absolutely agree with Mr Bradley. That is why there has been the need for this legislation and the potential for more legislation. It is not appropriate for a landlord to simply issue a notice to quit because a tenant is asking for improvements or reasonable measures to be taken. The council's environmental health officers also have the power to deal with damp and associated mould issues that are prejudicial to health through enforcing the statutory minimum fitness standard for housing, and that is applicable to all tenures.

Living High Streets: Update

5. **Mrs Mason** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the living high streets resource. (AQO 165/22-27)

Mr Lyons: The Member will be aware that the living high streets initiative is a community-led approach to place-making that brings people together to consider their local high streets, tackle common issues and enable places and communities to thrive. It is an initiative that was led by the ministerial advisory group for architecture and the built environment with the production of the living high streets craft kit. This was piloted in Downpatrick and led by the regeneration steering group there, which is made up of local businesses and community and political leaders. The Department would very much like to be in a position to provide further financial support. Any further resource support will be subject to the necessary budget being made available.

Mrs Mason: Minister, as you said, the Downpatrick regeneration working group has been working tirelessly with representatives of your Department and the local council to create the framework and vision for Downpatrick. I understand that there are budgetary constraints, but will you prioritise Downpatrick if a funding package becomes available?

Mr Lyons: We have certainly seen the benefit of that work, and I would very much like to be in a position to provide further financial support. Once the budgetary outcome is known, I hope that that will be the case. The Member has put her concern on the record.

Mr Kingston: Does the Department have any plans for further pilots to take forward the craft kit scheme, including in north Belfast?

Mr Lyons: It is funny that the Member should ask that, because the Department is working with the Greater Shankill Partnership, the Better Understanding in Local Development group and other key statutory organisations and stakeholders in the greater Shankill area to take forward a further pilot of the craft kit, subject to resources, in order to demonstrate its use in a setting such as the arterial route into Belfast.

Mr Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Questions for Written Answer: Ministerial Responses

7. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the rationale for referring Members seeking a ministerial response via an Assembly written question to the public affairs unit at the Housing Executive. (AQO 167/22-27)

9. **Ms Hunter** asked the Minister for Communities to outline who makes a decision on whether the subject of an Assembly written question is an operational matter. (AQO 169/22-27)

Mr Lyons: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will group questions 7 and 9. In determining whether an Assembly question is on an operational matter, consideration is given to whether the question is about the day-to-day running of an arm's-length body (ALB), advisory group or other public body with links to the Department. The aim is to provide clear delineation between my Department's responsibilities in policy development and operational delivery by ALBs and other relevant public bodies. That aligns with the principles of ALB partnership arrangements. Final decisions are made by me, as Minister for Communities, in approving answers prior to issue.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I half expected him to give me the Housing Executive's phone number [*Laughter*] because, in the first month of taking office, the Minister has referred 78 Assembly questions for written answer to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; that is not to mention questions that were referred to Sport NI or the Arts Council. Does the Minister think that that is acceptable, does it make him accountable, and has he any plans to review the practice?

Mr Lyons: No, I have no plans to review the practice, because I want Members to get information in the most timely way possible. There is precedent for it in the rest of the United Kingdom, as Ministers in Parliament often refer questions to outside organisations.

The Member can take the approach of writing to the Housing Executive to ask for the information, or he can go down a longer and more costly route. That route is to go to the Business Office, which takes the question and sends it to the DFC private office, which commissions a lead business area in DFC to deal with it. The lead business area then contacts the ALB to request specific information. The ALB gathers information and provides it to the DFC business area, which then drafts the response on the basis of the information provided by the ALB. The draft answer goes through the official-level processes and is then provided to the private office. It is reviewed by a spad — it would be if I had one — approved by the Minister and issued by the DFC private office to the MLA and the Business Office. It is simple and

straightforward: do you want the information as quickly as you can get it, in the most efficient way, or do you want to go through that whole palaver in order to get it? If the Member is serious about getting the information as quickly as possible, he will want to go by the first route.

I find it interesting that the SDLP announced that it was going into opposition by saying, "We will provide a new type of politics that addresses the problems facing parents and families across our communities", yet both of the questions that its Members have tabled for answer today are about the internal processes of the Assembly.

Ms Hunter: I seek clarity on that point for those families and our constituents. Was the Minister's predecessor doing something wrong by answering Members' questions and referring zero questions to the Housing Executive during her last two years in office?

2.30 pm

Mr Lyons: I am not saying that the previous Minister was doing anything wrong, but I certainly believe that the approach that I have taken will ensure that the Member gets her answer much more quickly and that there will be less pressure on my departmental resources. It is interesting that the Member has come along today to ask that question and has not decided to ask about housing, about poverty, about sports provision — [*Interruption*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Lyons: — about homelessness, about regeneration or about disability support. It is a process issue, and that is what the SDLP seems to be most concerned about.

Mr Speaker: That concludes listed questions. We will move to topical questions, and I call Daniel McCrossan.

Mr McCrossan: Sorry, Mr Speaker, I was caught off guard in the moment there.

Mr Speaker: Sorry to disturb you.

Communities: Staffing

T1. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for Communities, in light of his Department having approximately 700 fewer staff than is needed, whether he will draw up a workforce succession plan to manage the recruitment and retention

problems, the consequent skill set deficit and the significant number of temporary promotions currently in place. (AQT 111/22-27)

Mr Lyons: That has been identified as a problem. I want to see it addressed by ensuring that we have the right number of staff in place so that we can fully deliver on my Department's aims and objectives.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, at the Communities Committee, we were told that a recruitment pause, temporary promotions and staff leaving had exacerbated a major problem in the Department, particularly in developing strategies or getting them completed. When will the Minister publish an action plan to turn the staff crisis in his Department around?

Mr Lyons: I do not have that detail in front of me, but I assure the Member that I have concerns about that. We need a properly resourced Department, and we will take the necessary steps to achieve that.

Musical Instruments for Bands Programme: Funding

T2. **Ms Brownlee** asked the Minister for Communities, in light of the shockingly low 10% success rate in applicants to the Arts Council's scheme to fund marching bands, to provide an update on funding for this financial year and into the future. (AQT 112/22-27)

Mr Lyons: In this financial year, 2023-24, £400,000 was allocated to the musical instruments programme, and, of that, £200,000 was awarded to 23 bands across Northern Ireland. I am pleased to announce that, following a reallocation exercise as we approach the year end, I am able to allocate a further £100,000 to the musical instruments programme. The Arts Council has already assessed the applications and has now worked through the reserve list. I expect a further eight bands to benefit from the decision that I have made, and I look forward to visiting some of those that have benefited from the programme. Future funding will be dependent on my Department's funding allocation and budget for the next financial year. However, I recognise the importance of such funding to bands, and I hope to be in a position next year to offer further support.

Ms Brownlee: I welcome the Minister's update. Does he agree that marching bands make a positive contribution to our communities across Northern Ireland?

Mr Lyons: I absolutely agree that bands make an important contribution and do so in a number of ways. They give many young people an opportunity to get involved. Some will have little or no musical experience, and they can become proficient. You also find that those young people and others come from all sorts of socio-economic backgrounds. The bands can help to give people a real sense of belonging and community, and I know from experience in my constituency — I am sure that other Members will agree — that bands were an incredible support to local communities during the pandemic. They are also a vehicle by which important issues can be raised. I think of Cairncastle flute band in my constituency, which, a number of years ago, did a lot of work to raise awareness of the mental health issues that many in the community face.

From an individual and community point of view, bands are a great way of getting more people involved and of getting more people involved in the arts. I take the opportunity to thank the many people who are involved. They are nearly all volunteers, and they do a brilliant job across Northern Ireland.

Sport: UK Ministerial Discussions

T3. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on matters he raised with the UK Minister with responsibility for sport on his recent visit to Northern Ireland, particularly any discussions on the delivery of the subregional stadia programme for soccer. (AQT 113/22-27)

Mr Lyons: The Member will be aware that the Command Paper stated that a meeting would take place between the Communities Minister and the UK sports Minister within a month of the Assembly's return. That meeting happened last Monday. I was pleased to welcome the Minister to Northern Ireland and take him round a number of clubs to see the investment that will be required to bring those clubs up to standard. The Minister will write to the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister to outline the visit and the actions that need to be taken. I look forward to further action and investment to ensure that we can bring clubs up to standard.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answer. Were any requests for additional funding made to the sports Minister for the delivery of subregional stadia projects?

If the Minister has not yet visited Lisburn Rangers Football Club in Lagan Valley, I would like to offer him the opportunity to visit with me.

Mr Lyons: I raised that issue with the sports Minister. Every club that I visited with the sports Minister raised that issue with him as well. On departing, he was clear with me that he had heard the message, loud and clear, about the need for more investment in the sports infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

I am more than happy to accept the Member's invitation. I think that I have been invited to visit nearly every football ground in the country. If the club that he mentioned is not already on the list, I will be happy to add it to it.

Contingency Fund: Awareness Raising

T4. **Ms Mulholland** asked the Minister for Communities, who will be aware of the recent Trussell Trust report that stated that 62% of people on universal credit in Northern Ireland have fallen behind on their bills, to outline what his Department will do create awareness of the contingency fund, especially among those who are experiencing the five-week wait, given the lack of uptake of that fund. (AQT 114/22-27)

Mr Lyons: I am not aware of the specific figure that the Member mentioned. I know that a survey was carried out of, I think, 100 people in Northern Ireland. I am not sure whether that figure is from the same survey. Certainly, I want to ensure that people get what they are entitled to. I hope that the Member will refer people to the Department's Make the Call service so that they get the support to which they are entitled.

Ms Mulholland: On that mitigation, we face a cliff edge when we come to 2025. Can the Minister outline any plans to work against that and put in place support for people who might face that cliff edge?

Mr Lyons: I am aware of the difficulties that many people face and the additional help that will be required. I am waiting for a report to come forward on those mitigations, and we will then need to develop a plan on the way forward. That plan will require a budget and Executive support. I assure the Member that it is very much on my radar.

Housing Executive: Investment

T5. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the investment that is

required to bring the Northern Ireland Housing Executive up to standard. (AQT 115/22-27)

Mr Lyons: The short answer is, "A lot". The Housing Executive faces significant investment challenges. The 30-year requirement was updated via a stock validation report in 2021 and estimated to be £10.3 billion at 2022 prices. That reflects the cost to address the backlog in maintenance, ongoing stock maintenance and investment and the costs associated with decarbonisation and retrofitting. An outline business case has been developed that identifies a preferred option to tackle the significant investment challenge and to put the Northern Ireland Housing Executive on to a sustainable footing. Officials are in the process of testing the assumptions made in the outline business case and around access to borrowing.

Mr Harvey: Thank you for your answer, Minister. What actions will you undertake to meet those funding challenges and to help to address the shortage of social housing in Strangford?

Mr Lyons: There is a serious issue of concern here. The current situation is, in my view, not tolerable beyond the short term. The additional problem that we have is that the investment challenge is getting worse with every year that passes. I want to put the Housing Executive's 82,000 homes on to a much more sustainable footing so that tenants have confidence that we are able to keep them safe, warm and dry in the long term. It will take a substantial injection of funds. Subject to agreement by His Majesty's Treasury, I want to see the Housing Executive having the same access to borrowing as social landlords in the rest of the UK. That is necessary and could be transformational.

Mr Speaker: Questions 6 and 7 have been withdrawn.

Grassroots Sports Clubs: Capital Funding

T8. **Mr Honeyford** asked the Minister for Communities, after referring to the fact that he has been torturing him with questions about the subregional stadia programme, and given the fact that, separately and importantly, some grassroots clubs are not able to apply for subregional funding, to outline the capital funding that will be available to grassroots clubs in the next financial year. (AQT 118/22-27)

Mr Lyons: Over the past three financial years, Sport NI has issued Exchequer funding of

almost £39.4 million and lottery funding of just over £17 million. That funding consists of 3,394 grant awards to over 1,900 organisations, including grassroots sports and sports governing bodies. This year, Sport NI will have invested £7.1 million of National Lottery funding to 37 sports governing bodies. We have an ambition to boost that figure to over £8 million next year and to provide £1.37 million of capital funding to improve sports facilities, including those that will benefit grassroots clubs. By way of comparison, the funding paid to sports governing bodies this year was as follows: the IFA received £500,000; Ulster GAA received £440,000; Ulster Rugby received £450,000; golf received £264,000; and tennis received £52,000.

Mr Honeyford: Thank you, Minister. We all want to see support for our grassroots clubs and the availability of capital funding. Previously, I raised with Sport NI and the Minister's Department the issue of creating a grassroots sport fund that would be open to all sports. It would help to empower local clubs and help them to realise their own vision. Will the Minister meet me to discuss that issue and to look in more detail at creating such a fund and at increasing and expanding the funding for grassroots sports?

Mr Lyons: Absolutely, I am more than happy to meet the Member or, indeed, any Member to discuss those issues, because they are critical. There has been huge underinvestment in grassroots sports and sporting facilities for many years. I believe that sport has the power to be transformational. Sport gets more people active and working together, and it creates better opportunities for our young people. That will take pressure off the health system, the justice system and other Departments that are short of money. It is the type of early intervention that really pays off, and I fully support it. I am happy to work with the Member on that.

Sports Clubs in South Down: Financial Assistance

T9. **Mrs Mason** asked the Minister for Communities, in light of the fact that, during the recent flooding incidents in South Down, a number of sporting facilities were damaged, whether he has any plans to provide those clubs with financial assistance to get them back on their feet. (AQT 119/22-27)

Mr Lyons: Although I have no specific plans around that at this stage, if certain facilities have been damaged in that way, I am more

than happy for the Member to bring details of those to me to see what support my Department or its arm's-length bodies (ALBs) might be able to provide.

Mrs Mason: Go raibh maith agat. [*Translation: Thank you.*] I appreciate that, Minister. Have you any plans in the longer term to work directly with our councils to review our community sporting facilities, specifically in rural areas and areas of deprivation?

Mr Lyons: I outlined to Mr Honeyford the emphasis and importance that I place on sport and having appropriate sporting facilities. There should be great working partnerships between councils, the DFC, Sport NI and our schools, which can play an important role in ensuring that there is appropriate provision for young people and those who do not find themselves in that category to play sport. I will progress work on that, and I am more than happy to work with the council in the area in which the Member lives or, indeed, with any other council in Northern Ireland.

Stadia Funding

T10. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for Communities for his assessment of the sheer scale of the additional capital funding that is being quoted for the regional and subregional stadia programmes, which is beyond what the Executive can credibly fund, in the context of the reported Budget landscape. (AQT 120/22-27)

2.45 pm

Mr Lyons: I am on record as saying that the funds that were set aside for the subregional football stadia were not sufficient. I do not think that they come close to meeting the need that exists. It was a small enough pot of £36.2 million in 2011, and it is an even smaller amount now in relative terms. That is why I have taken the action to speak directly to the UK sports Minister. I will, of course, engage with Executive colleagues to make sure that we have the necessary funding in order for those plans to proceed.

Mr Speaker: That concludes —

Mr Durkan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the interests of openness, transparency and full accountability on public funds, can you advise whether it is in order for Ministers to abdicate responsibility for answering Members' questions and reasonable requests for information to

agencies and arm's-length bodies that are funded by their respective Departments? Will the Speaker, perhaps, issue guidance to Members and Ministers on what constitutes a reasonable request for information under their respective Departments' remit and responsibility?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for the point of order. I anticipated that there might be a question on the matter, having reviewed the questions before today's proceedings. Standing Orders are pretty straightforward in providing that:

"A member may ask questions of

(a) a Minister, on matters relating to the Minister's official responsibilities;"

and

"A question must be answered as clearly and as fully as possible."

Therefore, if there is a question on a matter relating to a Minister's responsibilities, there is a duty on the Minister to provide a full answer to it. It is not in order to avoid answering by advising Members to send an email to someone else instead.

I emphasise the point to all Ministers, not just one. They are required to be accountable to the House and to the Assembly. I will not accept any attempts to evade that responsibility. I am not familiar with the specific questions, but I am aware that previous Ministers for Communities and, before them, Ministers for Social Development treated questions about the Housing Executive as matters relating to their official responsibilities and therefore answered them directly. I have not been informed of any reason why there should be any change to that approach.

I appreciate the Member's frustration, which is now on the record. I have an expectation that the duty, as set out in Standing Order 19(5), is adhered to when Ministers are answering Members' questions.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Private Members' Business

Workers' Rights

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly stands in solidarity with workers and trade unions in their campaign to improve workers' rights and conditions; acknowledges the insecurity that workers face due to precarious working arrangements such as zero-hours contracts, fire and rehire practices and bogus self-employment; recognises the importance of supporting work-life balance, access to paid carer's leave, and entitlement to tips and gratuities for workers; believes that increased trade union membership and recognition is vital to improving workers' rights and conditions; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to continue to work to bring forward new employment legislation to address these issues and to support and protect workers. — [Mr Kearney.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "paid carers" and insert:

"and miscarriage leave, and entitlement to tips and gratuities for workers; believes that the support of businesses, including through good employment practices and charters, in addition to increased trade union membership and recognition, is vital to improving workers' rights and conditions; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to continue to work to bring forward new employment legislation to address these issues and to support and protect workers." — [Mr Brett.]

Ms McLaughlin: In recent months and, indeed, over recent years, workers across Northern Ireland have been put under more and more intolerable pressure. The cost-of-living crisis, as well as the impact of decades of neglect and legislative roll-back on workers' rights, have left more workers struggling than ever before. Many are trapped in precarious, low-paid jobs, with little agency in their work and little hope that things will change.

It used to be said that the best route out of poverty was a job, but that is no longer true. After years of wage depreciation suffered by workers, more and more people are being pushed into poverty even while they are working, and generations of families are growing up without opportunity. In my city, a survey by the Derry Trades Union Council

found that 35% of workers in the area do not earn more than the minimum wage, while 73% struggle with bills. That is totally indefensible in a modern society. Meanwhile, the trade union movement itself has been hollowed out by regressive legislation introduced by the British Government in the 1970s. Too often, unions are not given their rightful seat at the table.

Of course, many employers would not recognise that picture in their own businesses. I know that the vast majority of employers, large and small, stretch themselves to do right by their workers. My party believes that employers and employees need to work together on those issues. It is positive that the amendment refers to the necessary support for businesses, but there is a huge role for government to play.

Although I am used to talking about the need for jobs for Derry, this is not about the need for any jobs; it is about the need for quality jobs. Good jobs are about many things: decent pay that eliminates in-work poverty; proper conditions that mean that workers are respected and valued at their work; a voice in that workplace; and security of tenure, where workers are free from the fear of unfair dismissal. Government has a crucial role to play in ensuring that the jobs and investment that we attract give people hope for their future.

I commend the Minister for his intention to make progress on the issue. For far too long, DUP Ministers refused to do so, and efforts such as Mr Carroll's Bill in 2022 were shot down unceremoniously by most parties in this place. I also recognise that the range of issues that need to be tackled by the Minister in the Bill is huge, but we need the legislation that is introduced to be really comprehensive and ambitious and genuinely to —.

Ms Eastwood: I thank the Member for giving way. Will she agree that the nature of stop-start politics and the collapse of our institutions over the past seven-odd years has impacted severely on our ability to legislate effectively for workers' rights?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms McLaughlin: I absolutely agree with the Member, and I thank her for her intervention. Indeed, as a result of stop-start government, we were never able to realise the intentions in 'New Decade, New Approach'.

We need the legislation that is introduced to be really comprehensive and ambitious and genuinely to offer a new deal for working

people. That means a transformation of our employment law to rebalance workplaces and ensure that all workers have the dignity that they deserve in their working conditions and in their pay packet. Ultimately, the motion is light on substance, and it only scratches the surface of the issues that need to be addressed. We need to go much further, including moving beyond mere recognition of issues such as the needs of unpaid carers. One in three women with an unpaid caring role in Northern Ireland has given up employment altogether to care. That deserves more than platitudes, and we ask the Minister to commit to at least five days of paid leave for the invaluable and often unrecognised work that our carers do to support our health service. I commend the work of Carers NI on that important issue.

I am also disappointed that the motion makes no mention of workers' issues that are specific to women and, indeed, of the gender pay gap. I welcome the amendment's focus on miscarriage leave, and the final legislation should also include the need for paid neonatal leave for families with sick and premature babies. Women's health is an employment issue. From menstrual health to the need for menopause leave, the issues that affect women's healthcare and the barriers that they experience have a direct impact on their employment opportunities.

I remind Members that political collapse here serves the interests of absolutely no worker in our society. Repeat stop-start government has forced workers out into the cold, as they have fallen behind their peers in other parts of these islands on pay parity. The dysfunction in politics here has frustrated our ability to implement the long-standing commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach' to reform employment laws. We will support the motion on workers' rights, and, as the official Opposition, we look forward to holding the Economy Minister to account on delivery. Ambitious legislation that makes progress on the issue is long overdue, and workers who have been let down by this place over recent years deserve no less.

Mr Delargy: If I were to scroll down through my contact list today, I could read name after name of people who have left Ireland in pursuit of a better life and of better career opportunities. Young people from across all communities and all corners of our country, equipped with their own unique skills and talents, have found themselves feeling underpaid, undervalued and overworked. Sadly, they have seen no compelling case to stay and build their career here. It is heart-wrenching, and we all understand the devastating impact that it has

on families and communities, as it is an experience that many of us have felt personally. That cannot continue.

We have to work together to do everything in our power to ensure that our young people see a future here at home, and we can begin to do that today by agreeing to strengthen workers' rights for young people and to commit to their enjoying, whatever path they decide to follow in life, fair pay and good working conditions at home. Imagine the potential that we would have as an economy, as a people and as an island, if, instead of the next generation of teachers going to Doha, of healthcare workers going to Australia or of tradespeople going to America, they could stay at home. We could have their innovation and creativity helping our island to achieve its full potential. Fair pay and good working conditions are not just desirable but absolutely essential for retaining our talented young people. Imagine being an even bigger powerhouse with young, bright minds teaching in schools, providing quality care for patients in hospitals, contributing to our communities, innovating in our industries and being trailblazers for positive and progressive change. By working together in the Chamber to create new and exciting opportunities, good working conditions and fair pay, we are investing in our next generation and helping to build a brighter, better and stronger future for our island.

It is a win-win: our talented youth gets the chance to thrive, and our island gets the enormous benefit of everything that their skills and passion bring. We can make the island that we call "home" the place where dreams can come true, where careers can flourish and where the future of every young person has endless possibilities. Together, we have the power to deliver that real change and to create a future where young people have the best possible opportunities to prosper at home, and that will be a game changer for everyone in our society.

Mr Honeyford: I start by acknowledging the tremendous dedication and hard work exhibited by workers across the industries and businesses that have continued to lead and grow our economy amidst Brexit and during the last seven years, when the Assembly has not sat for five of those years.

Our economy needs realignment to be able to grow. We need to get better at exporting our products and raising the value of money brought into this part of the world through growing our outputs. To do that, we need more skilled workers. We need to address the issues that hold back the creation and development of

those workers and, importantly, their terms and conditions as we move forward. The image of this part of the island for inward investment has unfortunately been hampered by a lack of stability in the Assembly, and that has haemorrhaged the confidence of those looking in over the last number of years.

Creating a new economy that respects workers, has trade unions at its heart and works to improve workers' rights and, importantly, their conditions is essential, as we move forward. As I have said in the Chamber before, life for everybody, including us in here, has challenges, and life is not a straightforward path. We all need protections to improve workers' rights and conditions for people of all backgrounds. Importantly, it needs to be stressed that, with working conditions, pressures and the services they are expected to deliver, fundamentally, it is simply about valuing our workers and putting value on them. As anyone who has run a business will know, your company is only as good as your employees. You cannot grow beyond their capability. Your employees are and should be your priority. If your workers cannot be positive about the business they work in, why would anybody else? The business products that they deliver and the standard, growth and development of any product that a company has is largely down to the value placed on the workers and the investment that the business has put into their staff, and it gets the return from them. It is of mutual benefit.

While there is always a need to work with our unions to update and improve the rights of workers, we also need to level the debate to note that we already have some incredible companies and employers in Northern Ireland that provide great conditions for their staff. Staff become like family to many of our small businesses, but I agree that that needs to become the norm. With Northern Ireland's economy dominated by small and micro businesses, that is more the case here than elsewhere, and that point needs to be made. Our economic future and the essential growth that is required for output mean that it is essential to increase productivity. One way we can do that is to finally address childcare provision and make it bespoke for this area, so that it works for hard-working families, as well as for businesses.

3.00 pm

Ms Nicholl: Will the Member give way?

Mr Honeyford: Yes, sure. No problem.

Ms Nicholl: Does the Member agree that the ability to access flexible working would make it far easier for people with childcare and caring responsibilities to be more included in the economy?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Honeyford: Thank you. I absolutely agree. My next sentence was to commend Kate, so that was a timely intervention. I was about to say that Kate has done a huge amount of work on the issue and that Alliance wants to see bespoke childcare provision delivered urgently in this term. That is a very important part of productivity. Carer's leave is another issue. Providing carer's leave and supporting more carers to stay in the labour market is positive for workers, but it also makes sense for business. So, I completely agree. The childcare and the carer's piece would support job retention, job satisfaction and productivity and would cut the costs associated with recruitment and training for businesses. Again, it is a win-win if it can be delivered quickly.

Ultimately, improving rights and conditions for individuals and families here will, in practice, increase our overall productivity. It also supports and works with the people in employment so that they can continue in their careers. Again, I stress that creating better conditions and improving workers' rights show that workers and staff are valued. That provides a win-win for employer and employee, gives a happier workforce and much more productivity, which increases economic output and, therefore, profitability. That is the direction that Alliance wants to see things going in. All the bits associated with that will allow our companies to grow and will protect our workers. I support the motion.

Mr Dickson: I declare an interest as a retired section member of the NIPSA trade union. Like my colleagues, I support the motion and the amendment, which underscore the critical need to improve workers' rights for those in Northern Ireland.

I pay tribute to the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, which, across the years, has supported workers in Northern Ireland, whether through the years of violence and political strife or in defence of workers' rights.

Northern Ireland is uniquely positioned with devolved employment law. It is bestowed with the power to tailor its own employment law to our distinct needs. However, regrettably, stop-

start politics has left our employment law in limbo, disadvantaging our workers compared with their counterparts across the United Kingdom, Ireland and indeed wider afield.

Despite having an anti-trade union and anti-workers' rights Government at Westminster, several steps have been taken, such as paid neonatal leave so that parents can look after their babies. Employees with caring duties can now take leave and protection for tip-based workers has been strengthened. We have also seen an enhancement in flexible working rights and redundancy safeguards for during and after family leave.

Meanwhile, in the Republic of Ireland, strides have been made with provision that allows workers to take breastfeeding breaks and leave for carers. It remains a stark injustice that our workers and their families in Northern Ireland lack those supports, protections and rights.

Together with those changes, I expect the Minister to bring forward a comprehensive employee rights Bill for workers in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, legislation for domestic abuse survivors in Northern Ireland, promising 10 days of paid leave, has yet to be commenced by the Department. Similarly, the extension of the Parental Bereavement Act, which I remember and was deeply involved in during the previous mandate, to cover miscarriage is an urgent necessity that demands immediate action from the Minister. Other provisions need to be expanded, such as the scope of the Safe Leave Act to include victims of sexual assault. It is unconscionable to expect anyone to choose between their job and recovering from such a profound trauma.

Regrettably, we have seen attempts to expand anti-strike legislation in the United Kingdom, and I genuinely hope that this House will stand united against any attempts to extend that here. Our job is to protect people in employment, including their right to strike. Ultimately, the freedom to join a trade union and strike is a fundamental human right. I would welcome the Minister's views on that, particularly around industrial action and trade union recognition. In light of those formidable challenges, my party supports all key stakeholders, from businesses to trade unions, working together to shape the law and future practice. The changes must be informed by a social partnership approach across business and trade unions. I pay tribute to my former colleagues in the Labour Relations Agency, who, since the introduction in 1976 of employment rights legislation in Northern Ireland, have worked tirelessly on that social

partnership model and to mitigate industrial action.

The recent pandemic presented many benefits for addressing climate change. We know that many people prefer the greater working-from-home levels. We need to preserve those new flexibilities for those who want them while ensuring that changing work patterns do not create new forms of exploitation. We must ensure that workers have the right to turn off.

Additionally, while outright bans on zero-hours contracts may impinge on those who find some elements of flexibility favourable, we need to ensure that new adequate and effective safeguards are in place. The Minister needs to give special consideration to how she will craft legislation in order to protect workers from unscrupulous fire-and-rehire practices, such as those that we saw in the recent P&O scandal in my constituency, where I stood alongside workers who were disgracefully treated.

I urge the Minister to implement the necessary reforms, bring forward legislation that meets the needs of working people in Northern Ireland, strengthen their employment rights and offer protection from day 1.

Mr Speaker: I call the Finance Minister, Caoimhe Archibald, who is standing in for the Economy Minister, to respond. You have up to 15 minutes, Ms Archibald.

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): I welcome the opportunity to speak today on behalf of my Executive and party colleague Conor Murphy during this important debate. I thank the Members who spoke about the importance of protecting workers' rights. I have noted comments from across the Chamber about valuing workers and ensuring that rights are enhanced and enshrined.

Members will be aware that Minister Murphy has already demonstrated the importance that he places on protecting workers' rights. When he outlined his economic vision to the Assembly in February, he articulated that increasing the proportion of working-age people in good jobs is one of his key objectives. New legislation to enhance workers' rights will be a key component of delivering that objective. Minister Murphy has instructed his officials to develop policy options for consideration as part of a wide-ranging good jobs Bill. New employment legislation will be brought forward in this mandate.

The motion provides a timely opportunity to hear from Members about the issues that are

important to them and about those that they would like to see addressed in the good jobs Bill. Minister Murphy is keen to work with Members from across the Chamber on many of those issues as work on the Bill progresses. Addressing insecure work and precarious working arrangements is a priority for the Minister. It is clear from the debate that many in the Chamber also recognise the need to challenge many of the problematic practices that are referred to in the motion. Exploitative practices that are inherently unfair to workers need to be stopped. The fact that certain practices may mutually suit some workers and businesses does not diminish our responsibility to improve the system for the many who do not benefit from it. Far too often, the flexibility that is on offer in those contracts leaves workers trapped in the types of precarious employment that have been described today. We want to address the unfairness associated with flexibility that is weighted too heavily in favour of the employer. Many workers, particularly women and younger workers, find themselves on those types of insecure contracts unwillingly.

Minister Murphy clearly stated in his economic vision that he wants to tackle zero-hours contracts and to replace them with contracts that provide flexibility and protect workers' rights. We must challenge bad practice, but encouraging good practice is an equally important approach to achieving the good jobs objective. Workers who are better able to balance their working life around their personal, family and caring commitments are happier and more productive, and they are more likely to remain in or re-enter the workforce, which benefits their employer and the wider economy. Flexibility that enables a good work-life balance can be beneficial to businesses by helping them to recruit and retain good employees. It also enables businesses to draw on a more diverse workforce by making work more accessible to everyone.

Stakeholder engagement is key to that process. That will take time. It is simply not possible that effective primary legislation will be drafted, consulted on and ready to be introduced to the Assembly in this calendar year. That is not to say that there are no improvements that the Minister can make more quickly through secondary legislation or non-legislative measures, and, once he has consulted, that is part of what he plans to do.

I want to pick up on a few points made by the Chair of the Economy Committee on supporting businesses. Good employment practices and employment charters can help to improve working lives and have been proven to be good

for business. The Labour Relations Agency has an important role to play in encouraging and promoting best practice, and we support the work that it is doing in that area.

In the previous mandate, a couple of specific pieces of legislation were passed in which I, as Chair of the Economy Committee at the time, took particular interest. In relation to the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Act 2022, the Minister plans to progress vital employment protections, including the positive legislative reforms that were passed in the previous mandate. Minister Murphy will consult on the detail of the introduction of paid safe leave for victims of domestic abuse. He has also asked officials to prepare regulations to extend the right of parental bereavement leave and pay to parents who, sadly, experience miscarriage up to the end of the twenty-third week of pregnancy and to make both the parental bereavement leave rights and miscarriage leave rights available from the first day of employment.

Gender pay gap legislation was mentioned by Philip Brett and Sorcha Eastwood. That is a matter for the Minister for Communities, but, obviously, it needs to be progressed as well.

Towards the end of the debate, Mr Dickson commented on the right to strike. I am speaking on my own behalf, obviously, but I believe that it is a fundamental right of workers.

In conclusion, the Minister supports the motion and has confirmed his plan to bring forward a good jobs Bill. He has clearly stated his intention to replace zero-hours contracts with contracts that provide flexibility and enhanced workers' rights. The Minister will also look at ways of strengthening the role of trade unions. A wide range of other issues needs to be addressed, such as support for working families, access to flexible working, creating better working conditions and enhancing the rights of workers in more insecure forms of employment. It is quite a task ahead and will be, no doubt, a real challenge. Only with the cooperation of all colleagues in the Assembly and working effectively with the Economy Committee will Minister Murphy turn that vision into reality.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Gary Middleton. He will have five minutes.

Mr Middleton: We welcome the motion and the debate. It is clear that the Chamber will unanimously support the motion, and we welcome the fact that Members agreed with our amendment in their contributions.

I believe that improving worker's rights is not only a moral imperative but an economic one. When workers are treated fairly and with respect, they are more productive and engaged. That leads to better outcomes, not only for employees, which is, of course, most important, but for employers, and to a stronger economy for all.

The DUP is committed to strengthening worker's rights. That was evident when we showed our support for public-sector workers by leading the charge in seeking changes to the funding model for Northern Ireland's pay and better work conditions to be met. We also delivered a statutory entitlement to parental bereavement leave in the previous mandate, and we want to see that urgently extended to those who, sadly, experience miscarriage. Sadly, that is an issue that affects far too many. I can speak, from my family perspective, on the physical and emotional trauma that it can cause. In many cases, women are expected to return to work immediately after a miscarriage, and that is an unacceptable, cruel and heartless situation that people find themselves in. I join my colleague Philip Brett in paying tribute to organisations such as TinyLife that do so much to raise awareness and try to bring about the change that we so need to see.

I move on to the 10X economic strategy for Northern Ireland that was developed by DUP Ministers. It is very clear that central to the task of making the Northern Ireland economy succeed is specialising in areas in which we can secure a productivity advantage, and, in today's knowledge-based economy, that depends more than ever on investing in people and cherishing and celebrating our workforce.

3.15 pm

My colleague touched on the fact that we have to make work more attractive. The Assembly could really make a difference on that. Sectors such as hospitality are desperate for workers. We need to do more to ensure that people are not penalised for working and that supports are there to encourage them to stay on. We also need to end the disparity with GB on the new protections against employers there withholding gratuities and tips from staff.

The issue of zero-hours contracts was also discussed. While some people may favour those in particular circumstances, we are aware that they can cause problems for workers in terms of income and security. Obviously, there is the lack of benefits, and, sadly, there is exploitation by some of the employers that utilise that initiative.

'New Decade, New Approach' states, on page 44:

"There will be an enhanced focus within the Programme for Government on creating good jobs and protecting workers rights. The parties agree that access to good jobs, where workers have a voice that provides a level of autonomy, a decent income, security of tenure, satisfying work in the right quantities and decent working conditions, should be integral to public policy given how this contributes to better health and wellbeing by tackling inequalities ... and combating poverty."

We need to see that addressed and brought forward in any new Programme for Government.

Of course, wholesale reform of employment legislation without substantive input from employers should be avoided. I welcome the Minister's comments on working with stakeholders to ensure that we bring people along with any new legislation that comes forward.

When we look at policies such as the right to disconnect in the Irish Republic, let us be mindful of the adverse impacts on sectors and businesses where a level of flexibility in engaging staff outside normal hours is essential to the success of their operations. Employers should be encouraged by the Government to proactively take stock of their policies and practices. However, that should not be done in a top-down way or an imposed process.

I thank Members for their contributions and for supporting our amendment, which, we believe, strengthens the motion tabled by the Members opposite.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Phillip McGuigan to make a winding-up speech on the motion. You have up to 10 minutes.

Mr McGuigan: No issue will have a greater positive impact on workers and their families than improving the whole ambit of workers' rights, conditions and pay. I am delighted to be a co-sponsor of the motion, which extends solidarity to workers and trade unions. The motion identifies a number of specific areas that need attention and, if agreed, will bring improvements and further protections for workers. It calls on those and other areas to be covered in the new employment Bill being

proposed by the Economy Minister that will support and protect workers.

We have all recently witnessed the importance and the strength of the trade union movement. I have been proud to stand on picket lines many times recently in solidarity with trade unions and the workers that they represent. I am conscious that, when I refer to workers, I could be talking about my family members, friends, neighbours and the many people who keep our economy afloat, our public services functioning and our businesses turning. It is absolutely correct that we, in the Assembly, highlight trade unions and their importance in the work to strengthen workers' rights and modernise legislation in order to ensure that our workers are protected in an ever-changing labour market.

By and large, everyone who spoke in the debate was supportive of the motion and the amendment, and that is welcome. Throughout Members' contributions on workers' rights, there were references to the cost-of-living crisis and its impact on families and the fact that a new deal for workers and families could be achieved through social dialogue with the trade unions, employers and government. Others gave the example of an employers' charter. Mention was made of the various practices contained in the motion — zero-hours contracts, fire and rehire, work-life balance, carer's leave etc — as well as the addition of miscarriage leave, as in the amendment.

There were numerous references to the gender pay gap and childcare as two areas where improvement is much needed. Others stated that we have fallen behind in the North with regard to workers' rights. They pointed to legislation in Britain and the South and said that legislation is much needed here. As well as working with trade unions and workers, we need to be cognisant of the fact that SMEs make up the bulk of our economy.

Numerous contributors referred to zero-hours contracts and mentioned that those are not just at odds with workers' rights but undermine the labour market and the economy. Workers must believe that the Assembly has their back and recognises their value: a number of Members made that point. Thanks was paid to Carers NI, TinyLife, trade unions and employers for their input and help to Members as they prepared for the debate.

The hollowing out of trade unions by successive Tory Governments was put on record. Reference was made to anti-strike legislation at Westminster, which, obviously, needs to be opposed. The hollowing out of workers' rights

needs to be reversed by comprehensive and ambitious legislation. It was pointed out that the impact of poor pay and conditions, particularly on young people, is helping to drive immigration, and that real change is needed across the island of Ireland to encourage and entice lots of our young people back.

A company is only as good as its employees and investment in its staff. As was pointed out, we have good examples of such companies, and those need to become the norm. Others said that the flexibilities that we learned during COVID could help workers in their work-life balance and make a positive impact with regard to climate change.

My colleague the Minister of Finance — when responding on behalf of another colleague the Minister for the Economy — pointed out the important effect that legislation that he will bring, and his focus, will have on workers' rights. He has already given a commitment, which was confirmed again today, to bring forward a good jobs Bill and other employment legislation. That will be welcomed by everybody. It will tackle zero-hours contracts and work-life balance. There will be important stakeholder engagement to ensure that all of this is got right. In her response, the Minister confirmed that the Minister for the Economy continues to take forward legislation on paid "safe leave" with regard to domestic abuse, and that work is ongoing on parental bereavement and miscarriage leave. That is to be welcomed, as is the commitment to strengthen the role of trade unions.

There was pretty much unanimous support for the motion. On some of the specifics, banning zero-hours contracts is and has been a priority for Sinn Féin. I commend my colleague who is on maternity leave, Jemma Dolan, who brought a private Member's Bill in the previous mandate, which achieved consensus from all parties. I am hopeful that the Minister will, as he has said that he will, deal with that in an employment Bill.

An employment Bill should try to close the loopholes in redundancy legislation and redefine fire and rehire for what it is, which is unfair dismissal. The Assembly should seek to improve work-life balance as part of any employment Bill. Legislation should be brought forward to improve workers' rights, including the right to request flexible working and the right to switch off from answering work-related texts and calls outside working hours. That should be a right for everybody, with the exception of politicians, obviously.

There should also be a right to paid carer's leave for workers with caring responsibilities. Like others, I pay tribute to Carers NI for the part that it played in ensuring that that issue was front and centre of the debate. As Carers NI and others have pointed out, access to carer's leave would make the prioritising of work and caring a lot simpler for the tens of thousands of people here who face that choice. Currently, people are forced to leave work or to work less, and they are therefore losing wages. Carers' rights must be addressed in any new employment legislation. Workers' tips and gratuities, the fact that there is legislation in the South and across the water and the fact that we need to work to ensure that legislation comes to fruition here were also mentioned.

In conclusion, it was a very useful debate. I am sure that, even in his absence, the Minister will take heed and cognisance of the issues raised and keep to his commitment to engage with the Assembly and others as he works to ensure that workers' rights are front and centre of everything that our Executive do.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly stands in solidarity with workers and trade unions in their campaign to improve workers' rights and conditions; acknowledges the insecurity that workers face due to precarious working arrangements such as zero-hours contracts, fire and rehire practices and bogus self-employment; recognises the importance of supporting work-life balance, access to paid carer's and miscarriage leave, and entitlement to tips and gratuities for workers; believes that the support of businesses, including through good employment practices and charters, in addition to increased trade union membership and recognition, is vital to improving workers' rights and conditions; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to continue to work to bring forward new employment legislation to address these issues and to support and protect workers.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the item of business. I ask Members to take to take their ease before we move on to the debate on education.

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

Integrated Education: Fresh Start Funding for Capital Projects

Mr Mathison: I beg to move

That this Assembly reaffirms its commitment to the facilitation and growth of integrated education as set out in the Good Friday Agreement; notes the Department of Education's duty to meet the demand for the provision of integrated education within the context of the overall sustainability of the school estate as set out in the Integrated Education Act 2022; welcomes the support of the independent review of education for expanding integrated education; believes that integrated education is fundamental to transforming our education sector, with both societal and financial benefits, and is vital to building a more shared and reconciled community; regrets the UK Government's decision to remove ring-fencing from £150 million in Fresh Start funding for new-build integrated education projects; further notes the Minister of Education's letter to the Secretary of State requesting funding for Fresh Start projects; calls on the UK Government to reverse their decision; and further calls on the Minister to seek to recommit capital funding to support new-build integrated education projects as a matter of priority.

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

Mr Mathison: I declare an interest, as my wife is a teacher in Millennium Integrated Primary School, which is one of the schools that has been impacted on by the recent decision taken by the UK Government.

Last month, 10 schools in Northern Ireland received the devastating news that funding for their new building projects had been withdrawn. For many, the new buildings had been in the pipeline for years, with significant preparation and adjustments having been made to the school estate to allow for works that some of the schools involved believed would start in the very near future. The affected schools received no notice of the decision. No prior engagement was undertaken with them, and absolutely no democratic scrutiny was undertaken of the significant intervention from the UK

Government to remove the ring-fencing from the Fresh Start funding scheme.

3.30 pm

The motion, in the first instance, seeks to reassure the 10 impacted integrated schools that the Assembly is speaking with a collective voice in calling for the UK Government to reverse their decision to remove ring fencing from £150 million of Fresh Start funding and to confirm that we are committed to providing capital funding to support the impacted schools with their building projects. We must be clear that, despite the actions of the UK Government, the money is not lost to the Executive and that the Minister must do all he can to bring it back under the control of his Department, with a commitment to ensure that it is invested in the schools that have been so badly let down.

Of course, we recognise that there is an immediate and pressing need for capital investment across the whole school estate. There are schools up and down the country, in every constituency, represented by every Member, that urgently require maintenance, new buildings and substantial refurbishment, and we are all aware of the need for capital investment to meet the needs of our special educational needs (SEN) learners. Years of chronic underfunding of our education system and multiple collapses of the Assembly have all contributed to the dire situation that we find ourselves in. The motion does not intend to downplay the needs of any school requiring capital investment. We are simply urging colleagues across the House to assure the 10 directly impacted schools that we recognise the utterly unacceptable position that they have been put in and that all that can be done to remedy the situation will, indeed, be done.

The Good Friday Agreement contains a specific pledge to facilitate and encourage integrated education as an essential element in the process of reconciliation. Last year, when celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, the Prime Minister said that integrated education should be the norm and not the exception. Indeed, only a few weeks ago, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State Lord Caine stated that,

"The UK Government will continue to support and promote educational integration in Northern Ireland - for the future success of Northern Ireland rests on its young being able to grow up looking forward to a shared future, rather than back to a divided past."

The UK Government have consistently claimed to be an enthusiastic supporter of integrated education, yet the decision to re-profile Fresh Start does the exact opposite of supporting integrated education. It has set progress back a number of years for schools that were in touching distance of receiving the critical investment in their buildings that they needed.

To give an example of the impact of that, members of the Education Committee will recall that last week we received correspondence from the principal of Bangor Central Integrated Primary School detailing the shock and disappointment that the school feels at finding out that the UK Government had removed the earmarked funding. In 2016, the school was announced for major capital investment, and the principal described how, since then, the hopes of children, parents, staff, governors and the wider community had been set on a new school build. Extensive work had taken place as the school discussed and planned for its new 22-class school build. The original opening date had been set for this year, but various delays had pushed that back to 2026. As it stands, the school does not know when the building will begin. They have been left entirely in limbo, with the rug pulled from under their feet. All this is just as the local council had approved the planning permission for the new site. It is unacceptable that a school can be treated so dismissively, and we must do all in our power to see that this is reversed.

Following the implementation of the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 in the last mandate, brought through by my colleague, Kellie Armstrong, the Minister of Education has a legal duty to provide sufficient places in integrated schools to meet the demand for integrated education. Under the Act, the integrated education strategy must quantify funding commitments and identify how resources will be made available for the support and provision of integrated education. When the Minister concludes the debate, I will be keen to hear how he will ensure those duties will be met in light of the removal of Fresh Start funding.

Finally, I once again emphasise that the motion is about the 10 impacted schools, schools that have had their funding from Fresh Start for a new school build removed. After significant plans and preparations, they have been completely left in the dark, causing significant upset and stress for all involved. I urge all Members to support the motion today and send a clear message from the Assembly that we hear their concerns, we stand with them and we will speak with a collective voice to urge the UK Government to reverse the decision and to

ensure that capital funding can be released as soon as possible. I emphasise again that, despite the unhelpful and illogical decision of the UK Government to remove the ring fencing from that funding — removing funding from schools that they have vocally claimed to support — the £150 million that we are debating is not lost to the Executive. I hope that the Minister can provide assurances today that he will do all in his power to access that money for the Department of Education and invest it in the schools that have so cruelly missed out, when they were so close to seeing the delivery of their projects become a reality.

Mr Butler: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all from "duty to" and insert:

"aim to meet the demand for the provision of integrated education within the context of the overall sustainability of the school estate as set out in the Integrated Education Act 2022; reaffirms its commitment to promote, encourage and facilitate shared education as stated in the Shared Education Act 2016; welcomes the support of the independent review of education for expanding integrated education; believes that integrated and shared education are both fundamental to giving our children the best possible start to their lives; and are vital to building a more shared and reconciled community; regrets the UK Government's decision to remove ring-fencing from £150 million in Fresh Start funding for new-build integrated and shared education projects; further notes the Minister of Education's letter to the Secretary of State requesting funding for Fresh Start projects; calls on the UK Government to reverse their decision; and further calls on the Minister to seek to recommit capital funding to support new-build integrated and shared education projects as a matter of priority."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): You have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr Butler: I move the amendment to the motion tabled by the Alliance Party in the sincere hope of being positive and proactive and of addressing some of the shortfalls of the motion, which, I am sure, are not intentional. After all, to reduce the vision and aspirations promised to the shared education and integrated education projects that were underpinned by Fresh Start would be, in

essence, to reframe them as having met an unfair end.

No one can argue that Northern Ireland has not had a fractious, difficult and politically unstable past. Taking the opportunity to miss an opportunity seems always to have been the political choice of the day. From the failure to establish a single education system as early as 1921 to the fact that we still have multiple sectors and management bodies that are charged with putting children first while meeting the often competing demand of upholding parental choice of school type provides challenges.

Today's motion and amendment speak almost exclusively to the need to secure funding that was previously promised, but I remind the House that the recent independent review of education has once more offered us the chance to pursue the goal of a single education system in which children of all religions, social and ethnic backgrounds, disabilities or abilities, whether academically or vocationally talented, will feel welcome and, more importantly, included.

Our children and, indeed, many people in the Chamber are post-Good Friday people. Thankfully, for almost all those people, the violence, hatred, intolerance and propaganda that my generation grew up with has gone away. The job is not complete, however, and there is more that we must do to copper-fasten a brighter and better future for the next generation. Multiple reports and studies have been completed to assist us in deciding how we can best achieve that. There are different ideas as to the genesis of the problem. Some believe that social injustice and inequality are the key contributors to division, and some believe that it is about separate education in schools. In many ways, both beliefs are correct, and we do not need to compete on that matter. The good news, where we have brought agreement, if not consensus, is this: in meeting the need to ensure that we tackle societal divisions and promote tolerance, the earlier and younger we engage our young people, the better the outcomes for Northern Ireland and the broader the opportunities for our young people.

One of the best things that I get to do — I speak about it often — is meet and engage with young people. Over the past number of years, I have spoken and, more importantly, listened to literally thousands of young people across this wee country. They are pupils from every type of school: Irish-medium, Catholic maintained, integrated, controlled, special, primary, post-primary, right down to nursery. I always ask

them what their priorities are, because, if we do not listen to their voices and give voice to them in the Chamber, we set ourselves up for them to fail. I say without fear of contradiction that the priorities of young people always include tackling poor mental health, protecting the environment, life and career opportunities and, importantly for today's debate, societal and educational inclusivity.

When the Assembly is down, which it has been for five of the past eight years, we are choosing politically to stall or end the work on all four priorities that I spoke of. I once more reinforce the need for a stable and secure Executive and for us all to recognise our role in providing good governance, delivering on the past promises to all and working together to end political stalemate, which impacts on the lives of everyone but most significantly on the lives of our young people.

It seems a lifetime ago that the UK Government allocated £500 million as a commitment to both shared and integrated education. That was welcomed universally, and, indeed, many groups, schools and sectoral bodies rightly embarked on ambitious project designs. Some of them, like Fort Hill Integrated College, are in my constituency. Those schools have long since been sitting on their agreed plans to redevelop their old and dilapidated estate. Last year, I was able to visit Millennium Integrated Primary School, and I toured the site with Barry Corrigan, the principal. It was infectious how he shared his vision and plans that day, and I was almost as excited as he was about what was in store for Millennium. However, I will not and cannot set aside what was promised in 'A Fresh Start'. In Fermanagh, the Brookeborough shared education campus, which has been sitting on its plans for 10 years, faces into an abyss that is not of its making. I know that many of those projects were spade-ready, and the recent developments with the money will have shaken all the people involved to their core. It is beyond imagination that we would double down on their pain by not acting collegially and with one voice.

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he recognise that Brookeborough — I thank him for mentioning it — is in a rural border constituency, so the campus would have been important for fostering good relations in my constituency?

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for her intervention. I agree, and I will go further than that. In Omagh, for instance, where we have seen some of the most costly acts of violence that would lead to division, we see the Strule

campus as a vision that is still not realised. As someone who worked on the Desertcreat project, which I hope to speak about in the Chamber in the not-too-distant future, I do not think that £150 million will build Strule. If we do not get commonality and agreement on my amendment, we will condemn Brookeborough, Strule and other shared projects and disengage them from what was promised in 'A Fresh Start'. I thank the Member for her intervention.

Shared education and integrated education are equally vital methodologies that can help us to equip our children by promoting tolerance and inclusivity. They can improve their life opportunities and societal awareness and help to build a better Northern Ireland for all. I ask the Assembly to endorse the amendment, which recognises the value of both shared education and integrated education and calls for action from the Secretary of State and the Minister to give confidence to the projects that are spade-ready so that people can see their pupils', parents' and stakeholders' dreams realised.

Mr Sheehan: During the last mandate, parties worked together to deliver the Integrated Education Bill, which, I should say, is now the Integrated Education Act. That legislation was delivered so that the Department could work to ensure that families who wish to avail themselves of an integrated school place for their child could do so, and efforts were to be made to make sure that the demand for integrated education would be met. We worked to deliver that, because, collectively, we recognised that there was a problem. The Department was lacking in its duty to integrated education, but, rather than living up to their obligations to people and public services here, the British Government have decided to rob Peter to pay Paul. That is short-sighted, it is bad faith and it is deeply damaging to the school communities that have been waiting for so long for capital projects to be delivered.

When the institutions were re-established, parties came together and endorsed the position that the British Government had to fund our public services properly and deliver investment that is based on need. It is a huge blow to be standing here just a few short weeks later talking about how already promised funding for 10 school capital projects is to be redirected to other places. Who pays the price for that? Our children and young people and our school communities.

I want to say clearly how important it is that shared education projects are not forgotten. Shared education was also a victim of the

sleight of hand by the British Government with the Fresh Start funding. When schools, preschools or youth organisations come together under shared education, they work together to provide opportunities for children and young people from different religious and socio-economic backgrounds to be educated together.

That is invaluable in our society.

3.45 pm

Shared education delivers educational benefits to children and young people. It promotes good relations, respect for identity and diversity and community cohesion. It is vital that shared education does not become just a footnote as this issue plays out. It is not good enough for the British Government to simply reverse that decision. Their whole approach to funding our public services is deeply flawed. They accepted that this place was underfunded for too long. I say this to them: do the right thing now and deliver the appropriate, necessary level of funding.

In fairness to the Minister, there was little that he could do. It was welcome that he moved the unfunded projects into the Department's major capital works programme, but that will give little comfort to school communities that have waited since 2016 for progress on their new builds. Eight years is long enough. Who knows how long they will have to wait after this latest blow? In the past, we have demonstrated that when we work together across the House, we can deliver results. That is what it will take on this issue and on the wider issue of funding public services. Whether it is our work through Committees or in the Executive, we have to work together in the interests of all.

Ms Brownlee: From the outset, I want to make it clear that I support all schools, including those in the integrated sector. I want to see educational benefits for all in Northern Ireland. The reality is that many schools outside the formal integrated sector are already integrated, although they do not have the title of "integrated" above their door. In fact, some schools outside the official integrated sector have a more integrated mix of pupils.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Ms Brownlee: Let me start.

The Department has a limited budget. In the past few weeks that I have been here, I have seen that it has constant, increasing demands.

Given the constraints on the education budget, that must mean that there are fewer resources for schools that cater for the majority of children in Northern Ireland. While I recognise and acknowledge that integrated schools do absolutely fantastic work in my constituency, it is also true that controlled schools offer the same opportunity for shared learning and development in the community.

The fondest memories that I have from school are those of participating in programmes such as those offered by Co-operation Ireland and Habitat for Humanity. Unfortunately, programmes like that are the first to be cut when budgets come under pressure or staff are strained. There are many good examples of genuine, organic integration at schools throughout Northern Ireland. Our experience of the controlled sector, for instance, is that it is open, inclusive and cross-community. That should be the desire of everyone here for schools across Northern Ireland. The schools in my constituency do great work on a restricted budget. Those schools may not have the label of "integrated", but continue to deliver, working with other schools, opening their doors to children from all backgrounds, providing a first-class education for all and naturally integrating children and teachers from all backgrounds.

We all want a society where all children are educated together. However, elevating one sector above another across Northern Ireland's educational landscape undermines rather than promotes those objectives. It is also important to note that while the motion calls for more capital funding for integrated schools, some schools in the controlled sector are in the worst condition in Northern Ireland.

There are those who claim — rightly so — that integrated schools have been waiting for a new build for many years, but, in my constituency, Carrickfergus Academy, which was formed by amalgamation, has been waiting for over 10 years for a new school, which was promised at that time. The school operates on a split site at present; a situation that creates significant problems and places huge demands on teachers and the school budget. The school serves some of the most deprived communities in East Antrim. The stress on the school is not fair for those children, who have to endure a school that requires many repairs, is on a split site and has lost teachers due to the tightness of its budget.

Only last Friday, I visited Carrickfergus Grammar School, where children have actually had to be excluded from certain areas of the school because the windows are literally falling

out. As I walked around the school, numerous bins and buckets were catching rainwater where it comes in through the roof. The PE department operates out of a shipping container — the same one that was there when I was at the school many years ago — and the home economics building is a mobile from the 1980s that is not fit for purpose. It is not good enough. The fabric of our controlled schools has been left to deteriorate. I do not want special status, but I ask for equality and for those schools to no longer be ignored.

If I had the time, I could give a large list of primary schools that require a major repair or that need to be knocked down completely and rebuilt. I will make it clear: I want every child in Northern Ireland to thrive no matter what school they attend, but I would not be doing my duty as a representative if I failed to mention the plight of schools in the controlled sector.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the contributions thus far. I also welcome the fact that the Department's acting director of investment and infrastructure will be coming to the Education Committee tomorrow, so we can probe the issues further. That is really welcome.

Almost a decade after funding was ring-fenced by the Fresh Start Agreement, it is appalling that those schools, parents, pupils and teachers are being abandoned by the Government. Some of those new-build projects, as mentioned by other Members, were almost shovel-ready. Temporary accommodation had already been put in place for classes, yet they were told at the eleventh hour that it was not happening. It is truly unbelievable. The cost of the negotiations' lack of substance is that integrated schools, which were quite literally waiting to begin development, have been truly abandoned through the collapse of ring-fenced funding. I am mindful that there is support for the expansion of the independent review of education, as it underpins the importance of shared education and integrated education in building a shared space wherein reconciliation and respect for difference can occur.

It is not just an issue of the withdrawal of funding having weakened our education system; our ability to have additional shared spaces has been weakened alongside it. I have seen in my constituency how some integrated schools do a fantastic job, such as Roe Valley Integrated Primary School in Limavady; Mill Strand Integrated School and Nursery, which is getting a new building in Portrush that should open shortly; and, of course, North Coast Integrated College in Coleraine.

I fear, as does my party, that further delays in resolving the funding issue only serve to compound the challenges facing integrated education and its infrastructure. I have real concerns about inflation. It is really important that, as a direct result of the funding being withdrawn, questions are asked about how we will move forward with increased inflation and how much more it will cost to build those schools. As it stands, those schools are eating into sufficient play areas. We know that our young people learn through play, and I am worried about what that will mean in the interim until they get that funding. It is eating into grassy and tarmacked play areas; that is really unfortunate.

We must invest, and we must plan. It is totally unfair that the schools believed that the projects would happen but the funding did not follow through. We know that money is tight, but going back on a commitment is unacceptable. Many principals have been left with no answers, and pupils have been left with an unfair lack of appropriate school infrastructure. It has disrupted progress in our integrated schools. We all must be reminded of the fact that integrated schools are a growing sector or sphere, and it needs to be adequately funded. There is real worry that not giving school buildings and capital projects to integrated education could potentially put parents off putting their children in fantastic schools across our communities and constituencies.

There is also a valid fear about how pulling the funding might mean that many schools will be hesitant to go for future funding of a similar nature. That is important to note as well. Across the schools that were impacted, sacrifices were made and decisions were taken on the school and its infrastructure based on the thinking that the money was coming. It is important to include that fact as well. We need to think about the impact that it has had on our school communities. It is clear that the decision has had a huge impact on trust in our Government and their decisions, because that money was pulled so suddenly.

I will conclude by reiterating the point that we often talk about the value of education, but we must make sure that we are funding it adequately. A huge aspect of that is the infrastructure of our schools. We talk about sustainable schools, but we must put plans in place that are robust and ring-fenced and ensure that those are not walked back on, as has been done and as the motion shows.

I want to give a shout-out to Claire Hanna, our SDLP MP, who is raising the issue at

Westminster. The SDLP has made a commitment to raising the issue at a local level in the House as well as at Westminster. Removing this money from the table is very concerning and leaves a question mark over the future of the schools involved. The funding goes towards a societal good and is of huge benefit to the local areas surrounding those schools. I urge the Minister to do all that he can to ensure that the funding is reinstated.

Miss Hargey: I welcome the opportunity to discuss this important issue, which is causing real concern to young people, their families and school communities. As has been said in the debate, we worked collectively in the Chamber in the previous mandate to deliver the Integrated Education Act 2022. Important work was done in the previous mandate to ensure that families that wanted to avail themselves of an integrated school place had the opportunity to do so for their children.

In that context, it is a real act of bad faith by the British Government to treat the agreed funding in the way that they have done. It is deeply damaging to the affected schools, some of which are in my constituency such as Millennium Integrated Primary School and Forge Integrated Primary School. As local MLAs, we know the direct impact that those decisions have on the school community, on the children in particular, on their families and on the wider community. That was reflected by the Education Minister in recent correspondence, particularly pertaining to Millennium Integrated Primary School, in which he said that the funding would provide additional special educational units in the new development. All the construction tenders were returned for that school, and it urgently awaits funding to proceed to construction. That is how close those projects were to completion. You can understand the real frustration and fear of the schools involved and their communities.

Scoil an Droichid, a primary school in south Belfast that provides for special educational needs, is in a similar predicament. I know that the Minister is aware of the situation, and I ask him to look at that case as well to see what can be done to rectify it.

As has been said in the debate, it is important that we do not forget about shared education projects. I was a bit surprised that those were not included in the motion. Shared education projects, too, are impacted by the decision on the Fresh Start funding, and there are concerns within the shared education community. Young people, schools and the wider community involved in shared education projects want to

work more collaboratively. They, too, could be negatively impacted by these decisions.

On the re-establishment of these institutions a number of weeks ago, all parties tried to work together to endorse a position on how we are being underfunded by the British Government. The British Government have acknowledged that themselves. It is children and young people who will pay the price of the scandalous approach that the British Government have decided to take. You have to ask this question: why would you do that? Why would you punish education, and, importantly, why would you punish children? We need to ask that question of the British Government.

Back in 2016, when the Fresh Start funding was committed to, the British Government said:

"this funding is a fresh demonstration of the commitment of the UK government, working alongside the Executive, to build the foundations of a genuinely shared future for all parts of the community".

The decision that they have taken in recent weeks does the complete opposite. It does not work with the Executive, nor does it offer hope to our young people or to our education community, which wants to work together to offer better opportunities by building a society in which everyone can take part.

I hope that we can all support the motion and the amendment. I call on the British Government to recommit to the statement that they made in 2016 and, importantly, to reinstate the funding.

Mrs Dodds: As a preface to my comments, I want to repeat words that I have said in the House many times.

We all aspire to having a Northern Ireland that is more peaceful and more prosperous and where our children can learn and play together; to having a society in which we value education as the means to a good job; to providing for our families; and to having a decent standard of life, irrespective of our perceived religious, social or political background. I am not blind to the need to make changes to our education system so that it can be more inclusive and provide greater opportunity for those who face barriers in accessing education and so that it is more connected to the needs of the modern economy.

4.00 pm

Today's motion arises out of the considerable anger at the reallocation of £150 million of Fresh Start funding by the UK Government, and that anger is understandable. There must be disappointment for the schools impacted. It must, however, also be acknowledged that, in the overall funding stream, nine new-build projects will be completed, including New-Bridge Integrated College in my constituency of Upper Bann.

There are a number of issues with the motion that I will highlight as being inaccurate. The motion talks about the:

"Department of Education's duty to meet the demand for ... integrated education",

and I see that the Chair and the Deputy Chair of the Education Committee repeated that inaccuracy. The law states, in section 5(1) of the Integrated Education Act:

"A reference in any provision of Northern Ireland legislation to support for integrated education"

is defined as:

"aiming to meet the demand for the provision of integrated education within the context of area planning and the overall sustainability of the school estate".

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. Given that she previously held a ministerial portfolio, will the Member agree with me how important it is that, even with non-binding motions, we are accurate when we try to reflect the existing legislation and that it needs to be accurate, word for word? Our very words and actions are in Hansard, and we can give a false sense of what can be achieved if we misquote.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): The Member has an extra minute

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I absolutely agree. Accuracy is really important so that we are not throwing around words but talking about what the law states, law that was made in the House in the previous mandate.

The law is clear that the Department must aim to meet the demand. That is extremely important to the need for sustainable schools, area planning and the allocation of capital funding. Schools in the controlled, maintained and Irish-medium sectors are all in significant need of funding, and the Minister has a duty to ensure equality of treatment for those sectors. It

is therefore extremely important that we understand what the law states. As I said, this is law that was made in the House in the previous mandate.

The motion further:

"welcomes the support of the independent review of education for expanding integrated education",

and there is no doubt that the independent review is supportive of integrated education. It is, however, equally supportive of shared education and, indeed, of community schools with shared ownership. The chair of the independent review of education, Dr Keir Bloomer, told MPs at the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee recently:

"There is a serious problem in the recent Integrated Education Act in that it places new obligations on the Education Authority and the Department of Education that are nearly incompatible with ... fairly dealing with all the sectors for which they are responsible."

We must value all schools equally, and there are many good examples of genuine integration in schools throughout Northern Ireland. That principle of choice and diversity must be respected. The controlled sector is one of the most integrated sectors; in fact, it is more integrated in some schools than the integrated sector.

Ms Nicholl: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dodds: No, I want to finish, and I am running out of time

It is one of the most integrated sectors that we have, but it is really important that we treat our schools equally and that parental choice be respected in how we deal with schools in the House. I have visited many of my local controlled and maintained schools, and their needs are just as great, in many cases greater. One school that I visited recently in my constituency has celebrated its 90th anniversary. It is in exactly the same building that was built for it 90 years ago, with no additional classrooms or facilities. The sensory room in that school is a disused disabled toilet with a screen around the toilet, and that is what children in that controlled school have to use. That is just not acceptable.

Ms Nicholl: I rise as a member of the Education Committee and the Alliance Party but

also as a representative for South Belfast, a constituency that has been particularly impacted by the gutting news about the Fresh Start funding. The community of South Belfast is devastated that the much needed new builds for Forge Integrated Primary School and Millennium Integrated Primary School have been impacted by the unilateral change in the funding arrangements by the UK Government. The school leaders, Barry Corrigan from Millennium and Neville Watson from Forge are in the Gallery today. I thank them for their attendance and resilience and the work that they are doing to reassure the school community. For them and the students, it represents yet another obstacle in what has been a series of obstacles on the journey to getting the buildings they deserve and have been promised. For children, it is more time spent in buildings that are, frankly, not fit for purpose, and it is not good enough.

I spent some time at Millennium Integrated Primary School just a couple of weeks ago, alongside my colleague Paula Bradshaw, and saw at first hand the significant work that has already been undertaken by the school to get ready for its new building. You can literally see that the ground is flattened and ready for the build.

Ms Egan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Nicholl: Yes. Go ahead.

Ms Egan: Will the Member agree that, in North Down, Bangor Central Integrated Primary School received planning permission for its new build just last week? That is a project that is ready to go, but, because it was promised Fresh Start funding, it did not put in for other capital works. It will have been an absolute waste of time and resources to get it to this point if it is not delivered.

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

Ms Nicholl: I completely agree, and that has an impact on the children. We did a Q&A session at the end, and the kids wanted to know when their school would be ready. They are so upset about that. They have been looking forward to their new school; the whole community has. Those hopes have been dashed for now, and that is why we have tabled the motion. It feels like we are getting into an integrated versus shared education debate, and it is not. We tabled the motion because 10 integrated schools are ready to go, and we want to see them built. That is our focus.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. I do not think that the Member is speaking about my contribution, but will the Member accept that Fresh Start funding specifically states that it is for shared and integrated education and that pulling that money affects shared and integrated projects together?

Ms Nicholl: I appreciate the Member's intervention. It was not directed at the Member; it was about how the conversation so far has been about these different schools and "What about those schools?". Of course, I understand that. As a constituency MLA, you want to speak up for your constituency, but the schools are not on the EA list of capital builds because they expected to get the Fresh Start funding. On the amendment and the specific point about shared education, we need to acknowledge that integrated education can be genuinely transformative for society in ways that shared education just will not be. That is an Alliance position —

Mr Frew: Wow.

Ms Nicholl: — and it should not come as a shock. Shared education —. I will clarify. I can see that that has come as a shock to you. I do not know why you would be surprised that an Alliance Party MLA —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Excuse me. Members, take your seats, please. Thank you.

We will not have that. I do not want any shouting across the Floor and all the rest of it. All remarks should be directed through the Chair. So far, the debate has been reasonable, and I do not want to hear squabbling in here. Have I made my point clear? Have I made my point clear? Thank you. The Member may continue.

Ms Nicholl: Thank you, Deputy Speaker.

Shared education as a stepping stone towards integrated education is one thing, but, if shared education is in itself the end goal, we are merely deepening and amplifying its otherness in proximity. Mr Butler referenced Baroness May Blood yesterday in his speech. I commend him for doing that: she was a fabulous woman who should be remembered by everyone for all the work that she did. I remind the House of her words in the Lords 18 years ago, which remain as true today as they were then:

"While I welcome any steps that could be taken to bring schools closer together in any

form, I hope that shared campuses do not become the easy thing for the Government to do—the soft option. The desire of parents and children to have integrated schools is clear, let us not waste it. There is greater potential here than sharing sports halls."

The schools that are ready to go are integrated schools. They have been waiting for years and have been let down time and time again. They need the reassurance of all of us that we will do everything in the short term to redirect to them the investment that was taken away without consultation and scrutiny. That is the focus of our motion: the 10 impacted schools.

Integrated education is a crucial tool in building a more shared and reconciled society. It is not a silver bullet, but it has a crucial role to play. We ought to give far more children the opportunity to access an integrated education system that is intentional. Integrated education is not just about sharing; everything about it is intentional. It is therefore crucial that the funding promised under Fresh Start is delivered. Ultimately, the motion is about the 10 impacted schools.

Miss Brogan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and thank the Members who tabled the motion. I am happy to support the motion and the amendment.

It has been mentioned by a number of Members, but I want to reinforce the point about how shared education must not be forgotten in the discussion. Shared education is a powerful force for good in our communities, and we must continue to work together to ensure that it is properly resourced and supported. Shared education not only delivers educational benefits to children and young people, it promotes good relations as well as respect for identity, diversity and community cohesion.

I make particular mention of the Strule Shared Education Campus in Omagh town. I take Kate's point that the motion is about the 10 projects impacted by the Fresh Start funding. The Strule project is not one of those, but recent announcements by the Education Minister suggest that it, too, could become a potential victim due to the re-profiling of finances by the British Secretary of State. I want to make it clear that we cannot let the Strule Shared Education Campus become a victim of British underinvestment. We must work together to deliver that flagship project, which will benefit not only the children and young people of Omagh and the surrounding towns but the local education workforce, the local economy and the wider community of Omagh and west Tyrone.

There are many benefits to shared education. It offers children from different religious, social and economic backgrounds an opportunity to learn together and to learn from each other. The Strule Shared Education Campus in Omagh is unique and exciting because at its heart lies Arvalee special school. Arvalee is a wonderful school with so many bright, happy and hard-working students and staff. Children with special educational needs, their families and their school staff should be a part of the shared education experience. The coming together of schools, including the special learners, gives those children and young people, who are at risk of being excluded by society, a rightful presence and a voice in education. The Strule project is not just about a shared campus; it is about a shared vision and the opportunity of equity for all children and young people.

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Miss Brogan: Go ahead, Robbie.

Mr Butler: Does the Member agree that it would be disrespectful to people in Omagh, where the Strule campus is long awaited and will probably not come in on budget at £150 million, to not vote for the amendment?

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

Miss Brogan: . Thank you. I thank the Member for his intervention. The Strule shared campus is really important to the people of Omagh and west Tyrone. We want to see it delivered, and there are some complexities around the Fresh Start money with it as well. We want to see it being delivered at pace.

Mrs Mason: Parties across the Chamber worked really hard to deliver the Integrated Education Act in the last mandate, because, collectively, we recognised that bringing children and young people from different backgrounds together through the education system can positively impact on our society and will help to promote diversity and respect from a young age.

Schools like Shimna Integrated College in south Down are testament to how integrated education delivers educational benefits to children and young people. It is so disheartening that the British Government have reneged on their promise to adequately fund these institutions, which has resulted in

integrated education investment being put on the back burner.

4.15 pm

Integrated education should promote good relations as well as respect for identity, diversity and community background. When funding is cut, it is our children, young people, families and school communities who, ultimately, pay the price. Shared education works best when schools, preschools and youth groups come together to work to provide opportunities for children and young people from all walks of life, regardless of their religious and socio-economic backgrounds, to be educated together.

Working to deliver the best educational benefits to children and young people should be a priority for everyone in the Chamber. Working to promote good community relations through respect for identity and diversity is vital to our peace process. Shared education is an invaluable tool. I echo the frustrations of my party colleagues and Members across the Chamber in saying that it is simply not good enough for the British Government to U-turn on vital funding. We must work together to ensure that all children in the North have fair access to education.

Mr O'Toole: Before I begin in earnest, I will declare an interest. I am a parent of a child who attends Forge Integrated Primary School, which is one of the affected schools. For nearly a decade now, it has been promised funding to build a new school at the old Knockbreda High School site, but it has now had that funding withdrawn. However, like Millennium Integrated Primary School, which is another school in my constituency, the question of proceeding with its build is as much an issue of natural justice as it is of belief in the integrated sector. I am a strong believer in integrated education and a proud parent of a child who is at an integrated school. However, there is a basic point. As sometimes happens in the Chamber, we have entered into a first-principles debate about different sectors. That is frustrating and unfortunate, because the motion is about a fundamental principle of natural justice. If schools, school leaders and communities are promised money to build new schools and are told to go through the planning process to tender contracts, and they are then to tell their pupils and school communities, "We're going to have a new school in a number of years", or, "By x date, we will have a new school", there is a basic point of natural justice. That money was ring-fenced, and, for nearly a decade, it was clear that not just the expectation but the

planning assumption, which has legal and financial consequences, was that those schools would be built. To then withdraw that money is profoundly objectionable. It is wrong. I am, clearly, a strong supporter of the integrated sector and of shared education, but whatever your views are on those sectors, there is a fundamental fairness principle. I welcome the motion today. I also welcome Barry Corrigan of Millennium primary and Neville Watson of Forge primary, who are here watching the debate today. I am sure that other integrated education leaders are watching as well.

I want to touch a little bit on the detail of some of the funding. As I said, we have talked a lot about the first principles of different sectors. There is a question for the UK Government, first of all. The UK Government and their Ministers, including successive Prime Ministers and Secretaries of State, have made much and said many warm words about their support for integrated and shared education. Indeed, when the money was first announced nearly a decade ago, I believe that Theresa Villiers — do you remember her? — said lots of warm things about integrated education. Successive Ministers and Westminster politicians of different stripes have talked about their support. To then withdraw that money as part of a financial package is perhaps to be expected from this particular Tory Government, but it is profoundly wrong and objectionable. They should be held to account. I hope that those in the NIO and Treasury who have made clear in the past that they support integrated and shared education will feel some shame while watching the debate.

There are also questions today for Executive parties, which have agreed in part, it seems, the financial package without nailing down the details. I do not want to labour the point too much, but contradictory and inconsistent claims have been made about what was and was not included in the £3.3 billion. The UK Government, and, indeed, the Independent Fiscal Commission, from which we took evidence in the Finance Committee last week, have been absolutely clear that that reallocated —

Mr Mathison: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I do not have time, I am afraid. I would normally take an intervention. I will take a very brief one from the Education Committee Chair.

Mr Mathison: Thank you. Very briefly, does the Member agree that, in December, the UK

Government made it very clear during the talks process that re-profiled funding packages were going to be in the mix for the scheme and that all parties, including the SDLP, were party to those discussions?

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

Mr O'Toole: The answer to that question is that we were not party to those discussions, because we left the room at that point. We left because we were not going to be in the Executive.

It is one thing to say that money will be re-profiled; it is another to ask what that money is and who will be affected. I do not want to spend all my time waxing on about that; what I want now is to see all the Executive parties — all parties here, including mine as the Opposition — agree that that ring fence should be restored. We can all talk about our first-principles views about integrated and shared education. Most of us, I hope, support it. However, let us be clear that the upshot of all this is not about that; it is about the ring-fenced £150 million that was promised and then taken away. If we are serious about this, there should be an Executive position that that £150 million should be restored.

Briefly on Mr Butler's point, he is right to point out the potential of shared education projects too. It is also important to say, notwithstanding the many commendable things in his amendment, that the specific projects affected are the 10 integrated schools. That is not to demean in any way the shared education projects that he mentioned.

My strong view is that the commitment that I would like to hear from the Minister, if he is able to make it, is that he will use his good offices to encourage the Finance Minister and others round the Executive table to agree that that ring fence should be restored. I hope that we can get agreement on that today. I hope also that we can see prioritisation. I welcome the fact that the Minister has, at least, given a commitment that several of those projects will be priority projects in the capital programme. I welcome that the Minister has engaged on that. As I said, I ask that he and others around the Executive table commit to reinstating the ring fence properly.

I strongly support the sector, as do others — the shared and integrated sectors — but we have to put our money where our mouth is. We have to be willing to prioritise, because politics and government — we are not in government,

of course; that is why I am making these points — are, ultimately, about choices. We can all debate our core principles and aspirations, but we need to be able to put our money where our mouth is.

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

Mr O'Toole: Let us restore that money. Let us make that a priority for the Executive.

Mr Carroll: I support the motion, not least because it is long past time that we moved towards a secular education system. In a state that was built on sectarianism and communal division, it is crucial that children live and are educated together, despite the divisions that are foisted on them by those in power.

It is also important to lay down a marker that we will not accept this latest Tory cut to our education system. The British Government need to cough up the £150 million and give it to the integrated schools, as was promised. Integrated education has been drastically underfunded for too long, not just by Westminster but by successive Stormont Administrations. In our view, the economic policies of these institutions have been the biggest barrier to education, integrated or otherwise. Stormont has actively stymied the growth and development of young people, whose schools have been decimated during two decades of Stormont-backed austerity.

As we have this discussion, it would be remiss of me not to mention the chronic underfunding of the Irish-medium sector, where over 60% of children are educated in temporary accommodation, huts and leaky-roofed old school buildings. Like integrated education, the Irish-medium sector provides for children from all backgrounds and of all religions and none. It is often not recognised that children from all backgrounds are educated and raised through the medium of Irish. I give the Minister notice: scores of parents are struggling to get their children into pre-nursery Irish schools in west Belfast and beyond. I declare an interest: I am a parent who is struggling to get his son into a pre-nursery, and I would appreciate some support or intervention from the Minister on that.

Despite a statutory duty on the Assembly to grow integrated and Irish-medium education, we have the absurd situation where kids cannot get into either, as I just mentioned. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that regressive political attitudes have hindered the growth of

the integrated and Irish-medium sectors, and, so far, I have seen nothing from Ministers to change my mind. Many will talk about the need to grow these sectors, but actions speak louder than words. They talk of reconciliation but are unable to reconcile their words with their actions, which have seen integrated and Irish-medium education systematically starved of funding for far too long.

I reiterate that I support the motion, but, like many others, I will wait to see what the Executive and the Education Minister do to advance the demands of non-denominational school communities and all those who have been let down by their policies.

Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): I welcome the opportunity to respond to today's motion. First, let me begin by paying tribute to integrated schools right across Northern Ireland. They play an important role in the wider mix of schools and sectors in Northern Ireland. I am sure that colleagues will join me in extending that tribute to all our schools, which do a fantastic job of educating children and young people, often in very difficult circumstances.

Since taking up office last month, I have been out visiting schools of all types from all sectors right across Northern Ireland, and I have witnessed the wonderful work that they do. I have enjoyed meeting the staff, the governors, the parents and, above all, the children. Those visits have cemented my view that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to delivering a high-quality education system. Education in Northern Ireland is based on the key and guiding principle, entrenched in our law, that children are educated, as far as possible, in accordance with the wishes of their parents. Mrs Dodds made that point. That is the basis on which our education system was founded — parental choice and plurality of options — and it is a cornerstone that I, as Education Minister, will defend and support in Northern Ireland.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Givan: I will.

Mr Sheehan: I accept the Minister's point and Mrs Dodds's point, but what you have to and should recognise here today is that, historically, both the Irish-medium sector and the integrated education sector have been underfunded, and that should be remedied.

Mr Givan: If you look back over the past number of years, you will see that the

development proposals that came forward for the Irish-medium sector were approved and that temporary variations in the integrated sector were approved. There has been investment in the integrated and the Irish-medium sectors. It is my Department's job and my job as Minister to support that and to do so for all our sectors. I have said that I will do it, and I will discharge faithfully all the various obligations upon me.

Mr Carroll: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Givan: Let me make some progress.

I believe that diversity and choice are a strength, not a weakness, of our education system. Every child, every school and every sector are important and valued in our education system, and they all have key roles in building a reconciled and shared society. Over the past two decades, society has been transformed. We have witnessed changes that most of us would have had difficulty imagining possible not so long ago. Continuing the journey to building a shared society is a key priority for the Executive. I believe that integrated education, which provides opportunities for children and young people from different community backgrounds to learn together, has an important role to play in that process.

The number of pupils accessing integrated education continues to grow. More than 27,000 pupils in Northern Ireland are now enrolled in 71 integrated schools. That is more than 6,000 additional places in the past 10 years. It is worth noting at this point that there are integrated schools that are oversubscribed and there are those that are undersubscribed. That is reflected in different sectors right across Northern Ireland. As for first preferences at primary-school level, 98% of those who express a preference for integrated schools are accommodated. Therefore, it is clear that we are responding to demand.

I take seriously my Department's statutory duty to encourage, facilitate and support integrated education. We will make it our aim to meet demand for integrated education, encouraging and supporting a growing network of sustainable integrated schools that provide high-quality education. I note that 33 of the 71 integrated schools are controlled integrated schools. They form part of the wider controlled sector, which is the largest sector in Northern Ireland. Those schools are open to all, welcoming children and young people of all faiths and none. They are inclusive, reflective of and embedded in the communities that they serve. However, we live in a rapidly changing

world, and there is not a single or simplistic answer to building a transformed and reconciled society. In that area, as in so many others, there are no magic wands.

4.30 pm

While integrated schools will be an important part of our long-term progress, so will other schools and sectors. Pitting one school sector against another or elevating one school sector above all others is not the answer to society's ills. Rather, we must focus on building a truly high-quality school system in which all our children and young people can flourish, regardless of who they are, where they come from or which school they attend.

Many schools in Northern Ireland, from all sectors, now educate children and young people from diverse religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and I welcome that. Schools have become adept at addressing community relations and diversity. Every school delivers the statutory curriculum, including the learning areas of personal development and mutual understanding, local and global citizenship and learning for life and work. Those were developed specifically to enable young people to learn about themselves and others and to develop tolerance, respect and open-mindedness through understanding similarities and respecting differences between people in the local community and beyond. The curriculum is designed explicitly to help children and young people to develop as responsible citizens who show respect for others, understand different beliefs and cultures and develop informed, ethical views of complex issues.

I am mindful that, over the past number of years, shared education has, with much success, addressed the legacy of separation and division in our society. It provides a model for collaborative working that takes account of difference and celebrates the wide range of identities and diversity that exists in Northern Ireland. A huge body of internationally recognised research highlights the impact of sustained regular contact through shared education as a mechanism for promoting reconciliation and driving school improvement. Shared education has a wide range of educational benefits and opportunities for learners to access a wide range of subjects, increase specialist teaching and facilitate the sharing of ideas and good practice between schools.

Two weeks ago, I was at the opening of the Limavady shared education campus, the very

first campus of that type to open in Northern Ireland. That is two schools, one controlled and one Catholic maintained, both strong in their own ethos and identity, coming together on one campus as one community, creating and enriching educational experience.

Before I conclude, I want to reflect on the removal of the Fresh Start funding by the UK Government. That funding was long promised to develop and support both shared and integrated education through providing much-needed facilities. Nine integrated schools and eight schools involved in shared education campuses at Strule and Brookeborough have been impacted by the removal of that funding. Therefore, it is regrettable, though predictable, that the motion as originally drafted refers only to integrated education and does not recognise the impact on the children, schools and communities that were promised investment in shared education campuses.

The motion is exclusive; it is not inclusive. It excludes eight schools that were part of the Fresh Start funding. There is a challenge for the Alliance Party in how it approaches education. As Minister of Education, I have made it clear that I will support all sectors. The Alliance Party has tabled a motion that is exclusive to one sector and does not recognise that the Fresh Start money included eight other schools as part of that funding model. The challenge to the Alliance Party is this: why was the motion, which is exclusive, does not treat others with equitability and is not fair to others, tabled? That is a question for them to answer. There is an amendment, which my party will support, that addresses that and provides an inclusive option that is fair and equitable. I hope that it will be supported. It corrects what, I hope, was an error on the part of the Alliance Party. If it was not a mistake, that speaks volumes for the Alliance position when it comes to how it will deal with education.

Mr Carroll: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Givan: Yes, Mr Carroll. I promised that I would give way.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for giving way. The Minister said that he supports all sectors and parental choice. Will he commit to meeting principals and parents who are trying to get children into naonraí and naiscoileanna, which are Irish-medium preschools and nurseries? Parents are struggling to get them into those schools, and a small sum from the Minister's Department could get them into their desired

local school. Will he commit to meeting those individuals?

Mr Givan: I am always happy to meet MLAs and have agreed to do that, because I have said that I will support all sectors, unlike Mr Carroll, who said that our education system was built on sectarianism. I ask Mr Carroll and the Alliance Party what message they are sending out to the controlled sector and the maintained sector. Ms Nicholl said, I quote, that shared education is not transformative. What an insult to those in our controlled and maintained sectors who do incredible work to support reconciliation. They meet regularly and provide opportunities for children and young people on a shared basis. The Alliance Party really needs to reflect on its approach and attitude to education.

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Minister for giving way. When I was at school in Fermanagh, I was involved in shared education-type models, which totally enriched my educational experience. We will have the Brookeborough and Strule campuses in rural areas. They will enrich good relationships and bonding in those areas. It is regrettable that Alliance has failed to recognise that in its motion today. I thank the Minister for his comments, because shared education is enriching the areas that I represent.

Mr Givan: The Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone makes a powerful point in advocating for her constituency and the benefits of shared education. The work that I have witnessed in my constituency and through my work as Minister of Education across the length and breadth of this country shows that there are schools that work across all sectoral boundaries. That is how we will create a truly shared society. It will not be achieved by trying to create a hierarchy of sectors, where some are deemed to be better than others. That is the road to division. It is not what I want, and I do not believe that it is what other Members outside the Alliance Party want. Let us move forward on the basis that I have outlined and represent all sectors in Northern Ireland.

As is noted in the motion, I have written to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I did so in the strongest terms, to highlight the importance of the Fresh Start programme and to ask him to honour the funding for those projects. Unfortunately, he has responded to advise that there will be no funding beyond the current financial package, and that is, I know, deeply disappointing news for everybody concerned. I have, however, taken the action of

placing the nine integrated projects and the Brookeborough campus into my Department's major capital works programme, and they will continue to progress in planning and design. I have also submitted high-priority bids for every project to the Department of Finance as part of the Budget process. I ask every party in the Executive to support those bids, to remember the commitments given in the Assembly when it comes to Budget decisions, to support me to support those schools and to allocate sufficient capital budget to the education sector to allow those projects to proceed.

The large and unprecedented growth in the number of children with complex special educational needs has placed 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. Now that Fresh Start funding has been removed, it is not a sustainable situation.

I stand willing and committed to the delivery of the projects, but I ask Members and parties not to call for funding for those schools in the Assembly and then fail to support me at the Executive table, as that is where the key decisions will be taken. Across my Department's capital programmes, in every constituency and in every school sector, there is a wide range of much-needed investment projects that urgently need to be delivered. Today, let us commit to providing sustained and increased levels of capital investment to the education sector to prevent our children from being left behind in damp, mouldy classrooms in facilities from a previous century.

Mr Carroll: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister incorrectly stated that I said that our education system was built on sectarianism. I ask that he clarify the record of what I said. I said:

"In a state that was built on sectarianism and communal division, it is crucial that children live and are educated together".

It is important that he is accurate when reporting what other people have said, including myself. I ask you to ask him to correct Hansard.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Your point of order has been made, Mr Carroll, and has been duly noted.

I have two other points that I want to raise with Members, and I thank them for the debate so

far. First, interventions should be short and to the point. Secondly, can we make sure our mobile phones are on silent, please, Mr Sheehan?

I call Tom Elliott to make his winding-up speech on the amendment. The Member has up to five minutes.

Mr Elliott: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I assure you that my phone is switched off and I do not have to give an intervention. Thanks to those who moved the motion and to my colleague, Robbie Butler, who moved the amendment, which, in my view, is broadly a correction of accuracy, and I appreciate that.

We have heard a lot about choice. We have heard a lot about exclusivity and inclusivity and what is inclusive. The difficulty that I have is that it appears that some in the Chamber want to almost force people to go to a single sector. That is not what we are about in Northern Ireland. We want that choice, and the Minister has said that he is willing to provide that choice. We do not want to elevate one sector above all others, and that is important.

I can recall, when I was at school — you will appreciate that that was a while ago — there was one school in our area, Lack Primary School, that is now earmarked for closure. It was a proper integrated school. It was in the controlled sector, but pupils attended that school from across the community divide and the religious divide. In my view, at that time, that was a good example of an integrated school in the controlled sector, but the controlled sector always facilitated people from across the community. It is unfortunate that the controlled sector was not broadly the main sector that could accommodate, because, to me, that could facilitate people from all communities.

I apologise to Mr Mathison that I was not here for the opening of the debate. However, Mr Butler moved the amendment that, to me, provided some accuracy to the situation and referenced the recent legislation and the 2022 Act. He highlighted the Brookeborough shared education campus and the Strule campus, which are two important projects in rural areas. Brookeborough, in particular, was referenced by my constituency colleague, Mrs Erskine. It is vital and has been worked on for years. That project has the opportunity to make a real difference in that area for shared education and experiences of different traditions. Another school in the constituency seemed to fall through the web some time ago, and that was in Moy. Two schools were working very closely

together, with just a hedge or a fence between them. They were able to work that relationship very well.

A number of Members highlighted the loss of the Fresh Start funding, including Mr Sheehan, Deirdre Hargey and others.

Diane Dodds quoted some of the legislation. It was helpful to highlight exactly what the legislation says and that one sector, integrated education, should not be put on a pedestal above others.

Cheryl Brownlee highlighted that, as I have said, many schools are actually integrated but may not have the title of "integrated" above the door or in the title.

Cara Hunter talked about the importance and fairness of supporting schools from all sectors and across the board.

I noted that Mr O'Toole, even as leader of the Opposition, tried to bring the debate back to what it was actually about, which was the loss of the Fresh Start funding.

I thought that Mr O'Toole, as leader of the Opposition, might have used the opportunity to talk about the difficulties in the Executive and what the Minister said about not supporting Ministers to get the funding for those capital projects, but he shied away from that somewhat and tried to bring the debate back to the re-establishment of the finance from the UK Government.

4.45 pm

Mr Carroll's speech was interesting. At the start, he indicated that the integrated sector should be the one and only sector, but then he went on to talk about support for the Irish-medium sector. So, I am not sure whether he supports there being one sector — the integrated sector — or whether he also supports the Irish-medium sector but no others. I will bring matters to a conclusion at that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): I call Eóin Tennyson to make a winding-up speech. You have 10 minutes.

Mr Tennyson: The Good Friday Agreement contained a promise to "facilitate and encourage integrated education" as an:

"essential aspect of the reconciliation process".

Over 25 years on, there are 71 formally integrated schools and colleges, representing just 6% of Northern Ireland's education settings and encompassing 27,000 children. That modest growth is extraordinary, given that it has been almost entirely parent, pupil, and teacher led. While communities have come together to set up integrated schools or to seek to transform their local school, not a single integrated school has been proactively planned for by government. Indeed, in 2013, a court found that the Department was doing the opposite of its duty to facilitate and encourage integrated education.

Integrated education is not just desperately needed, it is overwhelmingly wanted. Polling indicates that almost three quarters of parents believe that integrated education should be the norm, and a similar proportion would support their child's local school transforming to integrated status. We should embrace that demand and grasp the opportunity to make progressive change in our education system and across wider society. Indeed, the UK Government recognised that demand and the importance of integrated education in building a more shared and inclusive society when they committed to delivering significant funding for the integrated school estate in the Fresh Start Agreement.

The effective cancellation of the remaining £150 million of funding is a retrograde step and a slap in the face for the schools that Members have referred to, which planned and made provision on the basis of the promise of that funding being honoured and delivered. It also represents a screeching U-turn in the rhetoric of the Prime Minister — mentioned by my colleague Nick Mathison — who previously said that educating our children together should be "the norm, rather than the exception". It is not the first time that the Tories have spoken out of both sides of their mouth when it comes to Northern Ireland, and it highlights again why the Minister's approach of simply relying on the UK Government to see the light is, unfortunately, unlikely to bear fruit.

In recent years, the Integrated Education Act passed by the House placed additional duties on the Department of Education to aim to meet the demand for integrated education, as mentioned by Diane Dodds. In the intervening period, however, it seems that little has changed in the attitude of the Minister and his DUP colleagues who sit behind him, all of whom referred to the Act as an attempt to place one sector above all others. That could not be further from the truth. It is about righting a historical wrong and recognising the fact that

the Department has mistreated the integrated sector by not proactively planning for and supporting it.

I turn to a number of the comments that were made in the debate. I will speak first to the amendment, as proposed by Mr Butler. Mr Butler attempts to include shared education in the scope of the motion. The reason why it was not included in the motion is this: although Fresh Start was originally intended for shared and integrated education, the outstanding projects, which have business cases and planning approval and are in a state of readiness, are, overwhelmingly, integrated projects.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. I will be as fair as I can. Mr Sheehan and Mr Elliott have spoken. They were probably both here around 2014-15, and they understand that promises were made to all schools in Fresh Start. Is the Alliance Party seriously suggesting that we start to rewrite previously agreed commitments from the UK Government and the House?

Mr Tennyson: I may not have been here in 2014-15, but I can read, so I know what the Fresh Start Agreement says. As I have outlined, it made commitments to shared and integrated education; however, the projects, which would have relied on the remaining Fresh Start funding, that were taken out of the Department's major capital works programme are, by and large, integrated projects. That is an important distinction — the projects that are ready to progress are integrated.

The Minister referred to 17 school projects. The funding available is £150 million, and it is simply not the case that that is sufficient to fund all 17. It is important that we are all honest about that.

Cara Hunter raised concerns about inflation, and I agree. We have articulated to the Government that that commitment was made almost 10 years ago, and that should be reflected in any representations that are made.

Cheryl Brownlee and Diane Dodds made comments about the fact that there are schools other than integrated schools that are, in fact, integrated. That is a misnomer. Yes, there is mixing across other sectors, but there is a very clear legal definition, which the House endorsed, of what an integrated school is. As we have all agreed, we need to be accurate about that. When we talk about integrated schools, we are talking about a very particular ethos.

Mr O'Toole referenced the negotiations, and I know that what was agreed, what was not agreed and the openness and transparency around those is a hobby horse for Mr O'Toole. It is important that we set the record straight on that. The SDLP participated in negotiations from when they commenced until 13 December. I have a paper that was presented to all the parties on day 1 — it was 11 December — that makes reference to the UK Government's intention to re-profile existing funding streams. I sat beside Mr O'Toole at Hillsborough Castle on 12 December, and I do not recall him raising any concerns about Fresh Start or funding for integrated schools at that stage, unlike —

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Tennyson: I will.

Mr O'Toole: The Member is pointing out the fact that I was at Hillsborough Castle before Christmas. The fact that I went in front of TV cameras and did interviews would rather indicate that that was not a big secret. In fact, I issued a press release saying that we were not going to go back into Hillsborough Castle. Factually, when did he and his party colleagues first learn that the £150 million for shared and integrated projects was going to be cut? It appears that Alliance MLAs submitted questions for written answer in advance of the announcement being made formally, so I am interested to know exactly when he and his party colleagues were aware that those cuts were happening.

Mr Tennyson: I will be very clear. We received the paper on 11 December, and the SDLP also received it. Immediately, on 11 December, we wrote to the Secretary of State to express our concern about any attempt to re-profile existing funding, and we expressed specific concerns about integrated education and Fresh Start funding. Frankly, I would be embarrassed to be a member of the Opposition coming to the House decrying the situation when, actually, Back-Bench Members of Executive parties have done more due diligence and scrutiny on the issue. It is important that the Member accepts that, because some of his public commentary has accused us of doing otherwise.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Tennyson: I will, yes.

Mr O'Toole: I am intrigued. The Member is clearly dying to play politics with the issue rather than get agreement on a motion that we

are actually supporting today. It is slightly strange that I am having a debate with someone whose motion and policy intent I support. Will he also confirm that it was clear, unlike statements that his party colleagues made, that the reallocated money was always in the £3.3 billion? That is a statement that some of his party colleagues have tried to deny. They have tried to say that this was never part of the financial package, so will he confirm —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Will the Member —

Mr O'Toole: — [*Inaudible*] and that he is —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Toole: — happy to accept —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Toole: — my party's support for his motion today?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Mr O'Toole, thank you very much indeed, but you might have heard my earlier comments about interventions being short and to the point. Much as I imagine everybody round here has enjoyed the banter — [*Laughter.*] Enough. Mr Tennyson, will you continue?

Mr Tennyson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am conscious of time.

I do not want to play politics with the issue, but, in fairness, the Member raised it, and I am responding to the points that he made. It is important to set the record straight on that.

Gerry Carroll made comments about the pressures that Irish-medium education faces. I agree and understand the concerns that exist in that sector.

The Minister made a number of comments. First of all, I commend him for his visits to all sectors in recent days. They have been incredibly welcome, but it is apparent that the Minister is perhaps a better marcher than he is a céilí dancer. That was reported very well in his visit to Dungannon, but, genuinely, I thank the Minister for his work on that.

Where next steps are concerned, we are not simply coming to the Chamber to decry the position that we are now in. We want to be constructive and offer the Minister suggestions on the way forward. The motion notes the

Minister's letter to the Secretary of State, which is welcome. However, that should not be the end of the road. We believe that there should be an engagement with the Finance Minister in order to seek a resource to capital switch to enable that money to be returned for its original purpose. That may not be entirely in the Minister's gift, but we could do it and seek to prioritise it.

I am also aware that the Minister made reference to Strule and his intention to bid for money for it. I would appreciate it if the same priority were attached to those integrated projects that we referenced, which brings me back to Mr Butler's comments on Strule. This is in no way to be disrespectful to Strule; it is simply that Strule is not funded by the same mechanism. My colleague Kate Nicholl put it well when she talked about shared education not being the final destination. The Alliance Party is clear that we have a vision for a single education system. We have to be honest: we cannot maintain parental choice indefinitely and also seek to have a single education system; those positions are contradictory.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. The report of the independent review of education talks about a single education system but not necessarily with regard to parental choice of sectors. It talks about the management bodies. That is where we can achieve a single education system.

Mr Tennyson: I agree about the management bodies. I am conscious of time. I will just say that shared education is about putting children from different community backgrounds in different uniforms. In some cases, if it is not managed well — some shared campuses do it very well —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Mr Tennyson, will you bring your remarks to a close?

Mr Tennyson: I commend the motion to the House and ask parties to unite around the issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): I thank Members for that entertaining debate. It was one where we showed a bit of passion, which was, I think, quite useful.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 47; Noes 17.

AYES

Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Dr Archibald, Mr Baker, Mr Beattie, Mr Boylan, Mr Bradley, Mr Brett, Miss Brogan, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Delargy, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Ms Ennis, Mrs Erskine, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Frew, Mr Gildernew, Mr Givan, Miss Hargey, Mr Harvey, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Kingston, Mr Lyons, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Miss McIlveen, Mrs Mason, Mr Middleton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Miss Reilly, Mr Robinson, Mr Sheehan, Mr Stewart.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Butler and Mr Frew

NOES

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Mr Brown, Mr Carroll, Mr Dickson, Mr Donnelly, Ms Eastwood, Ms Egan, Mr Honeyford, Mrs Long, Miss McAllister, Mr McReynolds, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Nicholl, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Dickson and Mr Tennyson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly reaffirms its commitment to the facilitation and growth of integrated education as set out in the Good Friday Agreement; notes the Department of Education's duty to aim to meet the demand for the provision of integrated education within the context of the overall sustainability of the school estate as set out in the Integrated Education Act 2022; reaffirms its commitment to promote, encourage and facilitate shared education as stated in the Shared Education Act 2016; welcomes the support of the independent review of education for expanding integrated education; believes that integrated and shared education are both fundamental to giving our children the best possible start to their lives; and are vital to building a more shared and reconciled community; regrets the UK Government's decision to remove ring-fencing from £150 million in Fresh Start funding for new-build integrated and shared education projects; further notes the Minister of Education's letter to the Secretary of State requesting funding for Fresh Start projects; calls on the UK Government to reverse their decision; and further calls on the Minister to seek to recommit capital funding to support

new-build integrated and shared education projects as a matter of priority.

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

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

A20 Portaferry Road, Newtownards: Road Safety Improvements

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has given leave to Michelle McIlveen to raise the matter of road safety improvements on the A20 Portaferry Road in Newtownards. Michelle, you have up to 15 minutes.

Miss McIlveen: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. First, I thank the Minister for Infrastructure for being present to respond to this important Adjournment debate on road safety along the A20 Portaferry Road in my Strangford constituency. I was under the impression that the Minister might not have been in attendance. For those of us who bring issues to the House, particularly in constituency-specific Adjournment debates, it is incredibly important for Ministers to hear for themselves the issues and concerns on the subjects from constituency representatives. I am pleased that we have the opportunity to discuss what is a huge concern to my constituents. My remarks will cover a number of issues concerning the A20, which runs from the Portaferry Road roundabout in Newtownards to Inishargy Road in Kircubbin. The issues include flooding, coastal erosion, pedestrian safety and driver safety.

The Portaferry Road largely runs along the shore of Strangford lough. It is winding road, with a number of blind bends and hills. It is the busiest road on the Ards peninsula and serves as the most direct route for many of the villages on the peninsula to get to Newtownards and onwards to Belfast and other destinations. However, it is a dangerous road. In the past eight months alone, the Portaferry Road has been closed nine times for a variety of reasons. That, of course, only gives an indication of where an incident has occurred that required a road closure; there have been a large number of accidents and incidents along that road that do not result in road closures. Two of those closures were as a result of cars going off the road. Five were caused by traffic accidents, and the other four were the result of flooding.

5.15 pm

While, thankfully, none of the recent closures had any fatalities, in recent memory there have sadly been deaths due to accidents along this stretch of road. In July 2022, a motorcyclist died after crashing into a wall. The previous month,

another motorcyclist was killed when he was involved in a collision with a car just outside Newtownards. In January 2020, a lady died in a car accident just past Teal Rocks when her car left the road. In August 2020, an 87-year old passenger in a car was killed when the driver attempted to overtake on a blind hill near Kircubbin. In September 2018, another motorcyclist died after a collision with a bus. That was just a month after a man had to be pulled from a flaming vehicle following a two-vehicle collision. In 2014, an eighteen-year-old girl also lost her life following a collision. All tragic accidents that have left far too many families grieving. While I have referred to two cars leaving the road in the past nine months, there were further incidents in May 2023 and July 2022, and, of course, we are all familiar with the images of the bus that ended up in Strangford lough in 2015, which made the headlines.

There is no doubt, given those incidents, that this is a dangerous road. Of course, what I have outlined are the incidents that have been reported. There are incidents that have not been reported and those that have been close shaves. Ask anyone who lives in Teal Rocks or those who regularly exit Finlay's Road about how safe they feel and how many near misses there have been. I am regularly contacted, as, I am sure, my colleagues are, by constituents complaining about the safety of the road.

If I take Teal Rocks as an example, a number of the incidents that I have referred to occurred in that vicinity. It is a housing development on the edge of Newtownards of more than 170 homes. Those residents already face issues, but planning permission has been obtained for an additional 100 houses on a neighbouring piece of land that will use the exit at Teal Rocks onto the A20. There are understandable concerns that having more vehicles exiting will increase the risk of further collisions at the junction. The residential junction opens onto a 60 mph road. I raised that issue with the permanent secretary during the suspension of the Assembly. When the Assembly was restored, I asked the Minister if further consideration was being given to reducing the speed limit as a result of those additional houses. I was informed that:

"the current speed limit on the A20 Portaferry Road is 60mph (national speed limit) and is in line with the Department's current policy document".

That is considered to be appropriate. From what I understand, the most recent review of the speed limit took place in 2017. However, the vast majority of the incidents that I have

referred to have occurred since 2020. There is a danger with being a slave to policy, and that danger is being passed on to the users of the Portaferry Road.

A connected issue is the footpath that links Teal Rocks with Newtownards. It is in serious need of an upgrade. It is incredibly narrow and dangerous, given the volume of traffic, and walking a dog or pushing a pram is treacherous. The residents of Teal Rocks are terrified to use the footpath. When that was raised with the Department, we were told that it needs to be upgraded by the proposed developer of the land between Teal Rocks and the Old Shore Road. The planning permission for that piece of land has been continually renewed for the past 30 years, and it is increasingly unlikely that the land will ever be developed. While the Department prevaricates and delays, the residents suffer an increasing risk as the road gets busier and more dangerous.

Setting aside the general condition of the road, which is the result of years of chronic underinvestment by the Department — disproportionate underinvestment, due to the flawed means of distributing funding to the council area — there are major engineering issues that need to be addressed along the road. The road, being largely along the edge of Strangford lough, is increasingly susceptible to coastal erosion. On a number of occasions, voids have opened under the road. There is evidence of erosion at Anne's Point and the sea wall approaching Newtownards. As that continues, there will continue to be risks of other voids opening.

When I was Regional Development Minister, I commissioned an extensive assessment of the road following the tidal surge at that time, which resulted in essential remedial works being carried out. However, a number of storms have recently battered that coastline. On four occasions in the last four months, the road has been closed due to surface water and flooding during severe weather incidents. One of the areas that are being adversely impacted is at Nunsquarter, where the Inishargy Road meets the Portaferry Road, and another is near the Maltings, just beyond Teal Rocks. Those areas are getting more susceptible to flooding, which affects the integrity of the road surface. Both issues pose risks to drivers and vehicles.

The Department seriously needs to look at the way that it spends money. We have had £80 million spent on the A5 and £24 million spent on the York Street interchange, with not a sod cut. While I appreciate the challenges with each of

those projects, a small portion of any of those budgets would make huge improvements to safety along the Portaferry Road.

We could start by moving the national speed limit to take into account the settlement limit of Newtownards. We could also stop slavishly following policy and address the risks to the public and upgrade the footpath from Teal Rocks into Newtownards to create a safe walking environment. A further assessment of the integrity of this vital road is needed, and there must be funding for those repairs, not just patching of what is there. Addressing those flooding flashpoints now would save considerable expense at a later date.

We must invest in addressing the dangers of those accident black spots along the road. It is not good enough to blame driver error: there are blind corners and blind hills that, with the appropriate design and funding, could be engineered out. We do not need a major dualling scheme like the A5; we just need a safe road.

Ms Armstrong: I thank Michelle McIlveen MLA, a fellow Strangford representative, for securing the Adjournment debate.

Minister, I am a bus woman. As you may know — some of your Department definitely know — I worked in infrastructure for 16 years before I came to the House. Apart from a Euro 6 engine, a road surface is the thing that really gets my geek on: I can tell you about road surfaces that will keep the noise down.

I agree completely with Michelle McIlveen: the Portaferry road — the A20 — is a dangerous road. It snakes around Strangford lough and, as it does, is not very forgiving. If a driver makes a mistake, boy do they make a mistake. They will end up either in the lough or up against one of the walls. Mount Stewart and Grey Abbey House are two of the places that have significant lengths of wall along them.

A road does not kill anyone. It can sit all day: if nobody is on it, nobody will get hurt. However, as soon as you have drivers on it and the conditions that we have on the A20, all of a sudden you get a dangerous situation.

I agree with some of the things that Michelle asserted need to be done. There are certain things, Minister, I ask you to consider. We have only three minutes in these debates, so I will not take too long.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry, Kellie, I should have said that you probably

have up to seven minutes. I am not encouraging you; I am just saying. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Armstrong: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. I may take you at your word on that.

I have to say, Minister, that, if you drive the whole way along that road — the local vernacular may confuse you, but your officials should be able to keep you right — you will see that there is not a part of the straight out of Greyabbey that has not been cut up by a utility company and put back quite badly. The straight from Greyabbey to Kircubbin is awful. I am probably the one person in the House who is on it twice or three times a day. It pulls you so hard into the centre of the road that it is hard to keep a car on track because of the utility cuts on it.

There are potholes that have been filled and refilled time and again. There is a lack of lights at junctions. I have asked the Department about that before. I appreciate that, as Michelle said, we can really keep up with the policy, but we are talking here about road safety. I have asked the Department whether there is any possibility that we could light up some of the junctions of the 60 mph section of the A20. I wish that everybody on the A20 did 60 mph, but I have to say that quite a few do a lot more than that. Lights would be an improvement. As Michelle mentioned, moving the speed limit further beyond Teal Rocks would certainly help that part of the A20.

I would love to know why there cannot be crash barriers at key points when we know that there have been umpteen dozen crashes at them. There have been crashes involving buses going off the road or, sadly, domiciliary care workers in the early hours of the morning. At Mount Stewart, a stonemason had to be employed to replace the stones in part of a wall because it is hit that often.

We could do with some road safety signs on the road. I hope that those would not cost too much money, but reflective signs on some of the worst corners would not go amiss. I would also support any action that you, Minister, could take against private landowners who have allowed trees or plants to grow out over our footpaths. We could then take back those footpaths. The legal size of a footpath does not exist along part of the A20. Michelle McIlveen talked about Teal Rocks. Parts of that footpath, as you come up to it from Newtownards and just beyond as you head out towards Portaferry, are down to no more than a 12-inch rule. It is tiny. It is not fit for purpose.

I sit on the Ards peninsula coastal erosion group. We have banged on about coastal erosion for a long time. Minister, a hard decision may have to be taken on this in the future: do we keep the A20, or do we move it? Moving it would be very expensive. We need to look at our measures in conjunction with the local community and Mount Stewart, who talk about managing coastal retreat and the coastal work. I would very much appreciate hearing anything that you have to say about coastal erosion and how we can handle it.

I very much thank your team. Any time that I have contacted the local division, staff have been extraordinarily quick to come out and help, so fair play to them. As with the rest of your Department, Minister, I am sure that a few more pounds would help us, the A20 and your teams.

Mr Harvey: I thank my party colleague from Strangford for, once again, highlighting the issue and bringing it to the House. All the elected representatives for Strangford and the wider community have supported for many years the campaign to see a speed reduction along the A20 Portaferry Road. As other Members acknowledged, the A20 Portaferry Road remains one of the most dangerous stretches of roadway in my constituency. We have had ongoing engagement with DFI Roads officials over a period of years, but, unfortunately, the situation remains the same, largely due to policy constraints and the lack of residential frontages that are accessed from the public road.

While some road safety enhancements have been made along the road, with additional signage and road markings, speed remains the major concern. History has, sadly, shown the dangers that are associated with the A20. Schoolchildren from the Teal Rocks development are taking their life in their hands on a daily basis as they cross the road for school buses. Motorists who are unfamiliar with the road are met with hazardous conditions during periods of bad weather, with flooding and coastal spray often hampering visibility and impacting on braking distances dramatically. It is not acceptable that the basic necessity for action to reduce the speed limit is being denied due to policy constraints. This is an occasion when the contextual implications necessitate an exceptional circumstances proposal to reduce the speed limit in order to ensure that public safety is prioritised over policy criteria.

The basic question that faces the Minister and his officials is this stark and sobering one: how many people will we have to lose? How many

road users need to be injured before a common-sense approach will be adopted to address the legitimate road safety concerns along the Portaferry Road?

5.30 pm

Mr Mathison: I, too, add my thanks to Michelle McIlveen for securing this Adjournment debate today. This is an issue that anybody who has ever represented Newtownards, the Ards peninsula or the wider Strangford constituency will have had raised with them. I also thank the Minister for attending today to respond to the debate.

I mentioned that anyone who has ever represented Newtownards, in particular, will be very mindful of the issues. As you leave Newtownards, heading down the Portaferry Road, there is a particularly dangerous section. Tragically, it is a section that, as was referred to, has seen fatal and serious accidents in recent years. Michelle went through those in some detail, so I will not go through each one, but I will refer specifically to the incident in 2022 when, tragically, a motorcyclist died near the entrance to Teal Rocks. That incident really reignited, at that time, the calls to look at the road safety interventions needed on that stretch of road. Unfortunately, my experience of engagement with the Department was a refusal to engage with a request for an on-site meeting at that time. I think that references were made to a live, ongoing investigation, but I felt that an on-site meeting with elected representatives to look at the topography and at what the issues were would have been very helpful at that time. Regrettably, despite that tragic loss of life and many other incidents that have been mentioned — the residents of Teal Rocks have been central to this, in that they have been very vocal with all elected representatives on the issue — until now, there has been a lack of direct action from the Department. I hope that we will see some progress on the back of this debate.

I want to draw out what I see as the two most critical asks, and they have been covered already. The first is the speed limit, which needs to be reviewed urgently. As you leave Newtownards, as soon as you pass Londonderry Park, the speed limit changes to a national speed limit. To my mind, this sends a clear message to drivers, particularly to the many tourists who use the road, who do not know it and are unfamiliar with the fact that it is a really difficult road to navigate, that it is now appropriate to raise their speed. That just sends the wrong message when, in fact, they are approaching a winding, rural road, completely exposed to the coast on the other side. Also,

they very quickly arrive at the junction with a large housing estate, Teal Rocks, which, as we have heard, is, due to a recent planning application, soon to become a much larger development. In my view, the speed limit is neither safe nor appropriate for the road in question.

As referenced by my colleague, quite rightly, it is not necessarily the roads that are unsafe but driver behaviour. I think that every one of us has a massive responsibility, when we get behind the wheel, to drive appropriately for the conditions that we are presented with. However, I also think that the Department has a responsibility to set speed limits at a level that reasonably alerts drivers to what is an appropriate speed for the road in question. At the minute, those two things feel very out of sync, and that really needs attention.

The second critical intervention, which has been covered as well, concerns the footway that runs from Teal Rocks towards Newtownards. The Department has confirmed to me in writing that the footway does not even come close to meeting current standards. There has been no attempt to suggest that it does. However, the Department has also repeatedly refused to widen it. There has also been a failure to ensure regular maintenance of that footpath where there is a lot of overgrowth from private land. It is only when elected reps remind the Department that it is overgrown, is exacerbating safety concerns and is further narrowing an already unacceptably narrow footway that the Department seems to engage. There does not seem to be routine engagement with the landowner. That means that pedestrians walking from Teal Rocks are forced to use a footway on a road with a national speed limit, and, at points, the footway is much too narrow for two people to pass, never mind pushchairs, wheelchairs or anything else.

I delivered a petition in 2020. I surveyed every house in Teal Rocks, and it was unanimously agreed that the speed limit and footway needed urgent attention. What I hear from residents in that development is that, although they want to access on foot the beautiful landscape around them, Floodgates Park and a large part of the coastal path along the lough, and they want to access the facilities at Londonderry Park, they are choosing to get behind the wheel of their car for a short two-minute drive, simply because they would not ask their children to walk on that footpath. That does not seem to be acceptable to me. We are asking families to run the gauntlet every time they want to access their local facilities, and we need to try to give that the attention that it deserves.

I want to pick up on a reference that was made to being a slave to policy. I think that every Member here for this debate will have had the standard response from the Department about policies on setting speed limits and how the current limit is appropriate. One aspect of that, which is repeatedly raised, is that there needs to be frontage development on both sides of the road. On one side of the road is the sea. There is never going to be frontage development in Strangford lough; it is not going to happen. We really will have entered into a parallel dimension if we start to develop that section of the coast. That does not mean that the national speed limit is appropriate. We cannot be slaves to policy. We have to look at the history of that road and what local people tell us about it.

I really hope that the Minister can respond positively to what are, I think, moderate requests. None of us wants to see a further tragedy on the road. I hope that DFI has a plan to improve road safety. I reiterate my thanks to Michelle McIlveen for bringing forward this debate today.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister for Infrastructure. Minister, you have 10 minutes to respond to the debate.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure): First, I thank Michelle McIlveen for instigating this important debate on road safety on the A20 Portaferry Road. As has been pointed out, every life lost is a tragedy for those involved, and that is why road safety is one of my highest priorities as Infrastructure Minister.

I have listened intently to the comments on the issues raised by Members and have heard their concerns about road safety along that stretch of the A20. Road safety is an issue that impacts on us all in our everyday lives. We all have a personal responsibility to travel in a way that keeps ourselves safe. We also appreciate our shared responsibility towards other road users. My Department's role in contributing to that responsibility is very important to me.

As Members will know, unfortunately, road safety statistics across the North have been following a worrying trend. Last year, 71 people died on our roads. That is the highest figure in the past eight years and is significantly higher than in 2022, when 55 people lost their lives, and in 2021, when 50 people lost their lives. As of 7 March this year, a further 10 people had lost their lives on our roads. Each of those deaths is a tragedy for the families and communities impacted. It can never be acceptable that people are seriously injured or

killed on our roads. That principle underpins my approach to road safety and is a daily focus for my officials as they seek to discern the right response.

I turn specifically to the A20. As representatives of the area will know, the A20 is a central feature of life for those living on the Ards peninsula and the many thousands of people who use it daily. I am aware that the A20 is a popular local tourist drive, and volumes can be much higher during holiday periods and summer weekends. I have travelled it a number of times during those periods. As we all know, the road runs parallel to the shoreline of Strangford lough for a significant length. While that gives it a rich and beautiful character, the resulting alignment sharpens the focus on safety issues such as sight lines and safe overtaking opportunities. I am very aware of the number of collisions that have occurred on that stretch of road from 2020 to 2023. There were 48 collisions reported, and, sadly, five of those resulted in fatalities. Again, each of those deaths is a tragedy, especially for the friends and families of the people who lost their lives.

My Department has a range of policies, and I want to explain briefly what is behind those. As an elected representative, it can be an affront when an official turns round and says, "That does not meet the policy". Of course, we have to assure ourselves that the policy is up to date and that it is based on evidence and best practice. As for the skill sets of our well-experienced team of officials, be they in my Department directly or in the DFI Roads division that covers that area, in interpreting policy, I can assure you that, when I look at such matters, I quiz my officials on how they have interpreted a policy and what the outcome of that is. Before we had this debate, I engaged with my officials. They have offered to sit down with elected representatives — it might be useful to start this in Strangford — and go through why they have come to some of their conclusions and to further take on board comments from local representatives. That would be a very useful exercise. In fairness to my officials — you will appreciate this — road safety is of deep concern to them as well. They are members of the public. They are road users, and their families use roads. They, therefore, want to make sure that we get it right at all times.

Officials continually develop specific programmes of work, known as collision site remedial measures, to reduce the number and severity of collisions at sites where there has been a cluster of collisions.

Development of those programmes has informed our review of collision data from the PSNI, which includes detailed analysis of the factors deemed to have caused an accident, as best as they can be identified.

A review of the collisions that have occurred along the A20 highlights that there are two locations where there are small concentrations of collisions, tragic though those are. First, in the vicinity of Teal Rocks, which has been mentioned many times during the debate, there have been six injury collisions. Secondly, at Finlay's Road junction, there have been five injury collisions. The data — it does not seem appropriate to talk about "data" when we are talking about people's lives. The research indicates that there were different reasons for each collision at those two locations, which makes identifying one intervention or even a group of interventions that would have made a difference to those collisions a lot more challenging.

Away from those two locations, the collisions that have occurred on the A20 have generally been spread out along the 18-mile stretch. Again, there is no common cause, and a wide range of factors were recorded.

As some Members have said, any investment that we make needs to be effective in improving road safety along that stretch of road. The varied picture of causes and location makes that extremely challenging. That said, my officials do not simply stop at that. In fact, over the past number of years, they have introduced a number of road safety measures along the entire A20 from Newtownards to Portaferry. They continue to examine what more can be done to make a causative difference. For example, the Department has enhanced signing and road markings at the Finlay's Road junction to make the presence of the junction more apparent to motorists who may not be familiar with the area. In an effort to further improve driver awareness, warning signage, verge marking posts and white lines along the route have been upgraded.

I am pleased to inform Members that my officials are preparing a rolling 10-year resurfacing programme of stretches of the A20 Portaferry Road between Newtownards and Portaferry. I hope that the first project of 750 metres of resurfacing, which will extend from the Teal Rocks junction, will happen in 2024-25, subject to confirmation of my budget. That programme of resurfacing will address any defects in the road, creating an improved surface that will enhance the safety of our road network.

Other planned works on the A20 include a bus lay-by and hard stand at Strangford filling station beside Teal Rocks and footway near Cunningburn Road junction, which will complete the footway from Newtownards to Greyabbey and make the area safer for pedestrians. Just to check with Miss McIlveen, is that the same location as the rolling planning permission?

Miss McIlveen: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr O'Dowd: That is a different location; OK.

The draft road safety strategy to 2030, which was published in October 2021, is being revisited. I hope to present it to the Executive in the coming weeks. The strategy will set out my Department's approach to road safety in line with the internationally recognised Safe System approach, which accepts that collisions will happen but should never result in death or serious injury. The prevention of death and serious injury is focused under three key pillars: safe vehicles, safe roads and safe people. The debate calls into question whether significant sections of the A20 are safe. I commit to Members here that I will continue to engage with my officials in that regard.

I again thank Michelle for bringing the Adjournment debate and the Members who contributed to it. As I said, I will continue to engage with my officials on road safety along the A20. However — this is not a comment on any individual accident that has happened on the A20 or elsewhere — the best way to ensure the safety of our roads and to fulfil our long-term goal of eliminating death and serious injury on the roads by 2050 is by changing driver behaviour. No matter how much my Department spends on improving roads, if all of us drivers do not change their attitude towards speeding and careless driving, our death toll, which has increased in the past year, will continue to increase.

I will turn to a number of specific matters. Michelle, I do not have the full details of flooding along the road in front of me.

The road surface has been reported as being slippery in various areas. My officials are looking at that and examining ways in which we can improve the situation. That may result in resurfacing. I will also ask my officials to look at the matter of lighting at junctions.

5.45 pm

On the matter of coastal erosion, my Department is responsible for the road and a point just beyond the road. We have had to install a number of flood defences against that wall. If there are further weaknesses, I will ask my officials to look into them. If any Members have particular points that they would like examined, please inform my office, and we will follow up on them. I think that there is one way in which we can ensure the regular maintenance of the footway. I will ask my officials to follow up on that to ensure that there is engagement with landowners along the route to ensure that they are aware of their statutory obligations.

The speed limit is one of the policy decisions that we have talked about. It is currently based on best practice. I will ask officials to review it, but the issue goes back to personal responsibility and driver responsibility. If drivers ignore a 60 mph sign, will they ignore a 40 mph sign? That is the balance that has to be struck. I can, however, assure Members that the safety issues along that road are under active consideration in their entirety.

Adjourned at 5.46 pm.