



Official Report (Hansard)

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Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Tennyson, Eóin (Upper Bann)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 13 May 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Ministerial Appointment: Miss Hargey

Mr Speaker: I advise Members that I have received correspondence from Deirdre Hargey to advise of her resignation as Deputy Chair of the Committee for Justice, effective 9 May 2024. I further advise that the nominating officer for Sinn Féin has appointed Deirdre Hargey to replace Conor Murphy as Minister for the Economy. Ms Hargey accepted the nomination and affirmed the Pledge of Office in the presence of the Principal Deputy Speaker and the Clerk to the Assembly on 9 May. I wish her every success in her new role.

The first item in the Order Paper is Members' Statements, and the usual rules will apply.

Members' Statements

Social Workers: Staffing Levels

Mrs Dillon: I hope that the Minister of Health's officials are listening today and that the strike action being taken by social workers across the North will be brought to the Minister's attention. The action is being taken not primarily on pay and conditions, although our social workers' pay and conditions are an issue, but on staffing issues. There are extremely unsafe staffing levels in some of our social work teams, particularly in children's services. One team that should be a team of 10 is working with two social workers. That is not acceptable.

I am concerned by comments that were made at the Health Committee meeting on Thursday by witnesses from the BMA, representing junior doctors and consultants. They said that the starting point of the negotiation with the Health Minister was "No", without any negotiation. I hope that that will not be the starting point with social workers. I would like the Minister to take the matter extremely seriously and with the gravity that it should have. We are failing the most vulnerable children in our community and their families by not having the correct number of social workers and safe staffing levels, but we are also putting the social workers at risk by having them work in such conditions.

I want to see a plan from the Minister for addressing unsafe staffing levels. He needs to come to the Committee and the Assembly with a plan for how he will address the matter, and he needs to do so urgently, because we cannot allow the current situation to go on for social workers, vulnerable children and families.

Kilkeel Hockey Club: Recent Success

Ms Forsythe: I put on record my huge congratulations to Kilkeel Hockey Club on its incredible success at the weekend. Kilkeel Hockey Club made history on Saturday when

its ladies' and men's first teams played in the Irish Hockey Challenge final and the Irish Hockey Trophy final respectively at Lisnagarvey.

The ladies' team played exceptionally well and fought to the end but were narrowly defeated in a penalty shoot-out by Bangor Hockey Club. It was a huge honour and success for the Kilkeel team to win runner-up medals in the tournament, and I congratulate the ladies.

The men's team also played exceptionally well. They won 6-2 against North Down Hockey Club, thus taking the cup home to Kilkeel. I offer huge congratulations to the men's team, and I thank them for calling with me on their way home so that I could share in the celebrations. There is nothing quite like a blatter on your door from a celebrating winning team on a quiet Saturday evening, but it was brilliant for me to join them in raising the cup and to celebrate with them.

It was a momentous day and occasion for the club, which is about so much more than just the teams. Families, friends, supporters and the entire community share in the success. It takes a lot of hard work, training, sponsorship and dedication from everyone to deliver those results. Kilkeel Hockey Club is central to our community. It works closely with our school teams, and Kilkeel High School has recently celebrated much success as well. The team is therefore building a great legacy. There are many legends associated with the club, and, at the weekend, I thought of my old friend the late John Charleton, who would certainly have been leading the celebrations on Saturday.

Once again, I am delighted to record my congratulations to Kilkeel Hockey Club on its success. The club has made history and set the standard for others. I wish the team much more success in the future.

International Nurses' Day

Mr Donnelly: I acknowledge International Nurses' Day, which was celebrated yesterday, 12 May. It is a great opportunity to highlight the invaluable work of our nursing workforce across Northern Ireland.

During my nursing career, I saw every day the hard work and dedication shown by our nursing staff, and Health and Social Care (HSC) could not begin to function without them. Last year, 26,063 nurses were registered in Northern Ireland, performing a wide variety of roles in hospitals, care homes, health centres, prisons,

schools and people's homes. They worked on the front line throughout the COVID pandemic and continue to work under extreme pressure in our health service.

There are currently around 1,725 nursing vacancies in HSC, and there is a similar estimated vacancy rate in the independent and nursing home sectors, with nurses reporting high levels of stress and burnout. We have recently seen nurses have to resort to strike action to get equal pay with their colleagues across the UK. That is not an acceptable or fair way in which to treat that proud and compassionate profession. We must address the serious issues that are impacting on the profession or else the situation could deteriorate further, meaning that patient care will suffer.

We need to make sure that our nurses are respected and valued. Two key issues must be addressed by the Department during the remainder of the mandate. The first is the issue of fair pay for nurses. We have again seen pay levels fall behind the rest of the UK as a consequence of political failure in this place, owing to lengthy periods without a Minister and an Executive in place. The current pay offer is an improvement but does not fully achieve pay parity.

The second important issue is safe staffing. Nursing is a safety-critical profession, but, too often, nurses have been forced to deal with unacceptable workloads, which can cause stress and have an impact on their mental health. It is not acceptable that patients' needs cannot be met effectively. It is for that reason that we need new legislation on safe staffing, which the Minister has indicated he intends to bring to the Assembly before the end of the mandate. I encourage him to make it a priority, and, as a member of the Health Committee, I look forward to working with him to ensure that we deliver a fair deal for our nurses.

Ivan Hillen: 40th Anniversary

Mr Elliott: I put on record my commiserations to the Hillen family. I was at the 40th anniversary service for Mr Ivan Hillen yesterday. Ivan was murdered 40 years ago to the day yesterday, just outside Augher. The service was in Ballygawley and Ballyreagh Presbyterian Church. The deputy First Minister also attended the service.

Ivan was a farmer and was out tending to his livestock on the morning that the IRA came and cowardly murdered him. His murderers then ran

across the nearby border to the Republic of Ireland and went into hiding. Mr Hillen was a community activist. He worked for many local farmers, helping and assisting his neighbours. He was also a member of the Ulster Unionist Party and a delegate of the party's south Tyrone association. My commiserations to Ivan's late wife, his son and the rest of the family, who were there yesterday. At the very moving service, the life of Ivan was recalled.

Yesterday also marked 47 years since Douglas Deering was murdered in the village of Rosslea. His was the last business in Rosslea to be owned by a Protestant. In the decades leading up to that, there were at least five businesses in Rosslea that were owned by Protestant people, all of whom were forced out by the IRA's ethnic cleansing of that community. There was also a controlled school in the village that was bombed. That basically eradicated the Protestant community from Rosslea. Those were terrible deeds and terrible times, and there has been no apology for any of it. Nobody from the republican movement has shown any remorse for those crimes and cowardly, brutal murders.

Emergency Accommodation

Mr Durkan: Members may have seen or heard in the news today the heartbreaking but depressingly familiar story of a family being passed from pillar to post, living out of suitcases, on an emergency housing merry-go-round that is anything but merry. Not a day passes that I am not contacted about emergency accommodation, be it by a family made homeless; an individual in crisis, staying far from family; a constituent living near a hostel, worried about an increase in antisocial behaviour; or a service provider, desperately seeking GP access for clients who cannot afford to wait through red tape and bureaucracy. The situation is not just desperate; it is dangerous.

Accommodation that was once deemed a last resort has become the norm. The growing reliance on non-standard accommodation, such as hotels and bed and breakfasts, should be a concern for each and every one of us. The rapid escalation in emergency accommodation expenditure has seen costs soar to an eye-watering £7.6 million in 2022-23. That is a particularly bitter pill to swallow when we consider that the Department for Communities seems to be, or is, unable to fund homelessness prevention initiatives, currently operating at a deficit of £7.4 million.

There is much more to tackling homelessness than putting a roof over someone's head. A huge concern to me and my constituents is that, while they are, at times, told that there is no accommodation in Derry and are sent further afield, they are passed on the motorway by people being sent from Belfast to Derry for emergency housing. Spend in Derry has increased sixfold in the same period.

Homelessness is a health issue. It is a multifaceted and complex predicament that requires an urgent cross-departmental response. We are witnessing extremely vulnerable people with complex needs being discharged from healthcare facilities or released from prison and placed in emergency housing, away from their home town and support network. Individuals are left in a vacuum — untethered and grasping for support, which either is not there or is woefully under-resourced. Often those people are suffering from trauma, addiction, serious mental health issues and poverty, and are pushed even further to the margins of society by a system that clearly is not working. Their exclusion and marked isolation leaves them at risk of abuse, neglect and exploitation. It also leaves communities in fear and at risk of harm, given the volatile nature and, sometimes, violent past of some of the individuals availing themselves of emergency housing.

Of course, the answer is to build more homes, but, in the short term, we need a focus on local connection —

Mr Speaker: Time is up, Mr Durkan.

Mr Durkan: — assessment of a person's long-term needs and on-hand support services to improve provision.

Dementia Action Week

Ms Kimmins: Today marks the start of Dementia Action Week 2024. As chair of the newly formed all-party group on dementia, I know that dementia is one of the biggest health and social care challenges of our time. Yet, in decision-making, it still is not given the priority that it requires.

12.15 pm

This Dementia Action Week, the Alzheimer's Society published new research today revealing that the cost of dementia care in the North has now reached a staggering figure of almost £1 billion a year. That figure is set to rise to more than £2 billion by 2040, unless urgent action is

taken. More than 24,000 people live with the condition in the North, and I know that many Members, including me, have experienced dementia in their families and local communities. For many, dementia is viewed as simply a natural part of ageing, rather than being recognised as a devastating terminal illness.

Time is not on our side. The North is predicted to have the largest increase of people living with dementia by 2040, with an increase of over 51% to approximately 43,000 people. Over nine in 10 people living with dementia said that getting a diagnosis had benefited them by allowing them to plan for the future. It had allowed them and their families to receive practical advice, feel a sense of relief in knowing what the diagnosis is and get medication to help manage the symptoms of dementia.

Over one third of people in the North live with dementia every day without a diagnosis that could give them access to the right treatment and support. Thousands wait years for a diagnosis, and we would not tolerate such a long wait for cancer diagnoses. Research released by the Alzheimer's Society today shows that spending on diagnosis makes up less than 1.4% of healthcare expenditure across these islands. We need to make sure that all people can have access to an early and accurate diagnosis of dementia no matter where they live. If we do not address diagnosis rates, we have no hope of addressing the major dementia challenges that lie ahead.

Any delays to dementia diagnosis or improvements to care add considerable costs to the already overburdened healthcare system and our local communities. The research revealed today shows that, in line with the increasing numbers of people living with dementia, the need for unpaid care, often provided by loved ones or friends, will grow significantly, with 40% more people expected to require unpaid care by 2040. That is a major concern when one third of unpaid carers already spend more than 100 hours caring each week and 16% have had to give up work to care.

We are at a turning point for dementia treatment and research, and, therefore, we must act urgently to capitalise on that. For the first time, there is hope of detecting and treating dementia by diagnosing people with a simple blood test. Dementia's devastating impact is colossal on the lives on those it affects, the healthcare system and the economy. Now is

the time to prioritise dementia, and that starts with getting more people diagnosed.

Crusaders Football Club: Stephen Baxter BEM

Mr Brett: I offer my heartfelt thanks and congratulations and those of the people of north Belfast to Mr Stephen Baxter BEM, as he marks his retirement as manager of Crusaders Football Club, bringing to an end the tenure of the world's longest-serving football manager.

Appointed manager in February 2005 at a time of great difficulty for the club, Baxter went on to etch his name into the club's history books in a way that simply seemed unimaginable back then. Nineteen years, 953 games and 12 trophies later, he leaves Seaview as the club's most successful manager of all time. Since taking over at Seaview, Baxter has seen it all and won every trophy in Irish League football, transforming Crusaders Football Club into the successful community-based club that it is today.

It is fitting that, in his last game in charge, he secured for Crusaders, yet again, a European qualification game. In the modern day of transactional football, I do not believe that the dedication that Stephen has given to Crusaders Football Club will ever be repeated. He went from playing for the club to being its most successful manager, becoming a world record holder and an adopted son of north Belfast: Mr Baxter has seen it all. I offer my best wishes to him for a long and happy retirement for all he has done for our north Belfast team.

EU Enlargement: Anniversary

Mr Blair: I rise to recognise the recent anniversary of the EU treaty that led to the enlargement of the EU on 1 May 2004, when what were referred to then as the "A8 countries" joined and changed things positively for many millions of people across Europe. It has been well documented that, following that date, citizens of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia integrated into the EU, and many people from those countries availed themselves of the movement and opportunities that were offered to them, as did, at that time, citizens of Malta and Cyprus.

Of particular and local relevance today is the fact that, later this afternoon, members of the Polish community in Northern Ireland will host an event in Parliament Buildings to mark the anniversary, which coincides with Polish

Heritage Days, an event held annually across the UK in May. It will be a pleasure to join them later to thank them for involving me in the preparation for the event and to take the opportunity to share the special day with them.

Like other Members, I am sure, I have been lucky to have worked with members of our Polish community through my role as an elected representative and in my previous employment before I joined the Assembly. I welcome the opportunity to thank them for how they have enriched our community in Northern Ireland and assisted local employers, as well as creating local employment themselves. I say this to the Polish members of our community and to the Polish consulate in Belfast: the Northern Irish welcome remains as warm as ever, and your event in Parliament Buildings is much appreciated. I am sure that Members will join me in saying that, when there are challenges or when a small number of people seek to be unwelcoming or to undermine that welcome, we stand with our Polish community and will be here for it. I wish the organisers well for today, and I support their efforts to enhance relationships through establishing an informal all-party group (APG), which might meet twice a year.

I thank Mike Nesbitt — he cannot be here for Members' statements — who has been closely involved, leading the correspondence about today and keeping in touch with us all. I understand that he will be present later. I also want to mention Deborah Erskine, who liaised with us both before today's event, and the other Members who have been involved.

Housing: Public-sector Assets

Ms Ferguson: I thank Development Trusts NI, which briefed our MLAs last week on community asset transfer, particularly in the context of housing need not only in my constituency of Foyle but across society in the North.

There is an inextricable link between community asset transfer — community wealth building — and housing that surrounds the vital importance of delivering a socially productive use of land and property and achieving equality of housing for all. Across our Executive, Departments should be updating and publicising their asset register, as allowing for full transparency on the use and location of all government assets will make it easier to identify land, whether it is surplus or underutilised, for housing development and community use. Government bodies should be legally required

to map and publish their register of all their land and buildings. Land and Property Services (LPS) could collect and publish that information in a consistent and accessible manner.

Third-sector organisations are often to the fore of delivering essential services and helping to improve people's life and well-being. They should be given the right to purchase, lease, manage or use public-sector land and buildings unless it is in the public interest not to do so. A paramount area of consideration must be the extent to which those organisations' proposed use of the asset can contribute to our previous Programme for Government (PFG) objectives, particularly those on reducing housing stress. If we are to get serious about eradicating homelessness and reducing housing stress and the continued over-reliance on temporary forms of accommodation, which we have all heard about today in headline news, that vital work needs to be progressed for our families.

Although the primary aim of departmental officials is often to maximise capital receipts from assets, there are clear circumstances wherein the social benefit and social value that stands to be realised must be examined. I once again call on the Minister to publish the housing supply strategy in the first instance and then to work with the Department to deliver on the recommendations that are in the Department for Communities' October 2022 report on recommendations to advance community wealth building, particularly on working with our largest social housing landlord, in order to develop and implement a community-led housing framework.

Polish Community in Northern Ireland

Mrs Erskine: Today is a very exciting day as we mark 20 years of the Polish community's coming to Northern Ireland to make this beautiful part of the world their home. We say, "Thank you" to many of those people for the contribution that they have made. As has been outlined, later today in Parliament Buildings there will be an event to launch the Friends of Poland cross-party group, which will have the aim of maintaining the relationship between the Polish community in Northern Ireland and elected Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The group will aim to increase awareness of the Polish community and its contribution to Northern Irish culture, economy and daily life. It is hoped that, through the group, Polish communities living in Northern Ireland will feel

more connected to political life and able to contribute more to society through political means. The Friends of Poland group has been supported by the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Belfast and many other Polish groups. I put on record the work carried out by Maciek Bator, who many in the Chamber will know. Maciek has been a voice for the Polish community in Northern Ireland and has done excellent work in communities.

In the past 20 years, the Polish community has established itself in Northern Ireland, and over 25,000 Polish people now live here. They have added to our social and cultural tapestry and are the largest ethnic minority group here, with Polish the second most-spoken language in Northern Ireland after English. Poland is the only European country with a full-time diplomatic mission in Northern Ireland. A perhaps little-known fact is that, during the Second World War, Polish airmen were based here in a defence role, and Polish Second World War graves are located in several parts of the country. As a local representative, I have really appreciated the attendance of the Honorary Consul of the Republic of Poland, Jerome Mullan, at Remembrance Sunday events in Enniskillen through the years. His faithful attendance is a recognition and a symbol of the bonds and ties that bring our communities together.

I look forward to today's events. I thank my colleagues John Blair and Mike Nesbitt and other Members across the Chamber. Hopefully, we can all work together for a better Northern Ireland for everybody who chooses to live and work here.

Childcare

Ms Nicholl: Nora, a mother of one, wrote this on the Melted Parents NI social media site:

"I have had to take a temporary withdrawal from my nursing degree as I cannot afford the childcare to finish my last year and do not know if I will ever be able to finish within the time frame. It is so disheartening. It took me a long time to get into university and to get through the first two years of the degree, and, now, because I started a family, all the work and effort is gone. I have taken a year out. Hopefully, interim support for parents will be delivered by then."

It has been said time and time again in the Chamber that childcare is in crisis. We have all reiterated our support for it and the need for investment in it. Parents' expectations have

been raised, and they expected delivery. I have heard anecdotally from people who expanded their family in the hope that more support would be coming, only to be left wondering how they will ever be able to afford it. We made promises, and we need to deliver on them. We need to see the detail of what the £25 million for childcare will entail. We need a timeline for the childcare strategy. We need detail on the cross-departmental task and finish group: we need to know who is involved in that and what has been discussed around interim measures. We need costings for an affordable childcare scheme. However, more than anything else, we need urgent interim support for parents and providers, who are, frankly, on their knees. I wanted to bring the voice of that parent into the Chamber today, because there are so many more like her.

I will finish with the comments of another concerned parent, who wrote:

"The empty promises and zero signs of an immediate interim solution are soul-destroying."

People are losing faith in our institutions. It is so important that we give them information and something deliverable soon.

North West 200

Mr Buckley: This year's North West 200 showcased the very best of Northern Ireland. Glorious weather meant that thousands flocked to the north coast to enjoy some fantastic road racing. Local rider, Glenn Irwin securing his 11th superbike win really was the gem in the crown of a fantastic week of racing and, indeed, community spirit on the north coast. Over 120,000 supporters attended, including families, and tens of millions watched online. If ever there was a case for our wee country to be broadcast into rooms across the world, this was it. I pay tribute to Mervyn White and his team of over 200 volunteers, who put together the race and do the hard yards to ensure that the spectators and, indeed, the riders have a safe day out.

12.30 pm

So much is done for the Northern Ireland economy. It takes £1 million to run the North West 200, the vast majority of which is supplied by the private sector. If ever there were a case for increased central government funding, it is this event. For the £1 million spent, over £12 million is generated for the local economy: a spectacular figure. I have no doubt that, if

central government got behind that, we could reach even greater heights.

As the race approaches its 100th year, I call on central government to review its approach to the North West 200. A motor sport task force looked into tangible actions that government could take to ensure that the event prospers. I now call for an implementation body to ensure that those recommendations are followed through and that the North West 200 continues.

Again, my congratulations go to the organisers and those who partook in the races during what, as the largest outdoor sporting event on this island, was a truly magnificent event.

Mr Speaker: I call Daniel McCrossan. You have two minutes, Mr McCrossan.

Dementia: Support

Mr McCrossan: I take the opportunity to welcome the Alzheimer's Society and Dementia NI to Parliament Buildings. I had the pleasure of visiting the dementia bus at the front of the Building, a fascinating experience that gives a real insight into the challenges faced by dementia patients across Northern Ireland. I pay tribute to the family of Sean McGrane from Strabane, who are in the Building today. Sean's wife, Sheila, and his daughter, Denise, do huge amounts of work in raising awareness and offering hope to people who face the tremendous challenges that are caused by dementia.

I also speak as the grandson of a grandmother who was diagnosed with dementia just after the death of my grandfather a few short years ago. As a family, we know very well the huge challenges that come with the diagnosis and the difficulty of the journey to get such a diagnosis in Northern Ireland. We are aware of the huge and growing numbers in Northern Ireland — 20,000 people now — and of the upward trajectory of dementia diagnosis. We need more support for people and greater awareness of how families deal with the ever-changing circumstances and challenges. It is not just the patient who suffers; the family suffers greatly alongside their loved one when they see a huge deterioration in their well-being. The person whom you know and love disappears almost instantly before your eyes and deteriorates further as each day passes.

My office hears weekly from families who struggle to find the support that they need for their loved ones: adaptations, financial support and services more generally. More needs to be

done to support people across Northern Ireland. This is a huge challenge for our society and the Assembly, and we must all do more to raise awareness and support those across our communities who suffer from this terrible disease.

Mr Speaker: A Member crossed the Floor of the House in front of the Speaker's Chair, which was inappropriate and should not happen. I remind Members that, if they need to cross the Floor, they should do so behind the Chair. Never cross the Floor in front of the Speaker's Chair.

Opposition Business

Programme for Government

Mr O'Toole: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that the devolved institutions have now been restored for 100 days; recognises the challenging financial situation facing the Executive; acknowledges the need for an improved fiscal framework that recognises the underfunding of public services in Northern Ireland; further notes that the parties now in the Executive engaged with the Northern Ireland Civil Service on Programme for Government commitments for a sustained period prior to the restoration of devolved government; regrets that the Executive have yet to confirm a date for the publication of a Programme for Government in their first 100 days in office; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to commit to publishing a Programme for Government or a summary of key planned Programme for Government outcomes before the Assembly summer recess.

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

Mr O'Toole: Today is our third Opposition day. We intend to use it to focus on delivery, but, before I move on to my substantive remarks, I wish Conor Murphy well. He has temporarily stepped down from his role as Economy Minister, and I think that all of us will wish him a speedy recovery and hope to see him back at his desk and in the Chamber soon.

I also associate myself with the remarks made by Deborah Erskine and John Blair in relation to the 20th anniversary of the accession of eight Eastern European countries and the role that they have played in broadening our society in Northern Ireland and increasing our diversity. It is hugely welcome, and I too will be at the event later today organised by the new Friends of Poland group.

Since taking up the role of opposition, we have been consistent in saying that we intended to be constructive. We recognise that, after years of collapse, austerity and deteriorating public

services, not everything could or would be fixed overnight or, indeed, fixed in the course of this mandate. From the health service to housing, our infrastructure, the childcare crisis that was just mentioned in Members' Statements and our stubbornly high poverty levels, the incoming Executive were faced with challenges that are not easily resolved but are, in fact, deeply embedded and, in some cases, structural. We know, for example, that the health service requires more investment but also a multi-year programme of reconfiguration of services around specialisms; longer-term recruitment strategies for all healthcare professionals; more use of cross-border services; and, ultimately, a broader societal shift towards a greater emphasis on prevention and upstream public health improvement to limit the burden of managing chronic conditions for an ageing population.

I use the example of health to acknowledge the complexity of the challenges that we face and the solutions that are required. It would be utterly wrong of me to stand up, bang the lectern and insist that we get all the challenges in the health service sorted overnight. That is not possible in any society, let alone one where we have allowed the health service to get to the state that we have in Northern Ireland. I acknowledge today the complexity of the challenges that the Executive face, and we have done that since we entered into opposition. However, the public of Northern Ireland are not unreasonable, and they are not daft. They know that the challenges will take time and effort to resolve, but they expect a plan. If the plan itself is not yet ready, which it does not appear to be, then, at a bare minimum, they deserve to be told when the plan will be published.

One hundred days on from the restoration of the institutions, we have had 28 motions from Executive parties promising action on everything from waiting lists to childcare support to the MOT backlog. In many cases, those motions are presented as if they substantively change the law or allocate funding: they do not. A casual observer watching the First Minister publicise motions calling for improved childcare or support for holiday hunger might naturally assume that, since the person speaking is the joint head of the Government here, the motions come alongside a meaningful plan involving legislation or allocation of funding, but they do not. While motions in the Assembly by governing parties can be a legitimate way of putting items on the agenda and airing issues, they cannot be a substitute for practical action and delivery. Otherwise, the Executive parties

collectively risk inviting even more of the cynicism that our politics has generated in recent years.

Our motions today, starting with this one, focus on delivery. We would like to see a Programme for Government (PFG) delivered soon. Is that so unreasonable?

We have not had one in nearly a decade, and we know, as our motion highlights, that the Executive parties met, and were meeting, for, I think, more than 18 months with the head of the Civil Service to agree the key parameters and the outline of a draft Programme for Government so that it would be ready to launch when an Executive were formed and our devolved institutions restored. I do not know how many of those meetings happened, and I do not know specifically what the outcomes — outputs, as management consultants say — are or were, but I do know that they happened. There have been countless meetings about strategies and priorities, but we have not yet seen a Programme for Government, nor do we know when we are going to get one. We therefore want to know when we are going to see a Programme for Government. If we cannot see the document itself, we want to know when it is going to be published. What is it going to state? Will it appear alongside some meaningful form of multi-year Budget, and, if the Executive's position is that a multi-year Budget will have to wait for a multi-annual spending review from a new UK Government, what types of targets, what indicative spending plans and what key targets for the rest of the mandate can the public expect to see be prioritised and delivered against? Is that so unreasonable? Is that such a mad, unreasonable ask of a Government?

It was disappointing to be told recently by the First Minister that, collectively, we should not be in a hurry to see a Programme for Government. I remind the leadership of the Executive that we have not had an operational Programme for Government in nearly a decade. I see that the deputy First Minister is shaking her head. I am happy to take an intervention from her at this point if she wants to correct me on that statement, but my understanding is that we have not had a fully signed-off Programme for Government since the 2011 Programme for Government, because the 2016 Programme for Government was published only ever in draft form. During the brief 2020-22 period of an Executive, there was no formally signed-off Programme for Government. I therefore do not think that we have had agreed, updated Programme for Government targets in a decade. I do not think that it is unreasonable to

ask for them, because how else can the public judge what the Executive are, or are not, delivering for them?

Executive parties face the challenge of navigating a multiparty mandatory coalition. Yes, constraints are imposed on them through having a devolved settlement with limited control over revenue and an austerity-obsessed Tory Government in Westminster. Our motion acknowledges the extremely difficult financial position that we are in and that the Executive are in. Nobody should be in any doubt about that or be in any doubt that the UK Government should agree a better and more reasonable funding settlement for this place. None of that, however, is an alibi or an excuse for parties that sought power — parties that are made up of people, the faces of whom, in many cases, were on most lamp posts across the country — not to set a plan, set priorities and be honest with the public about the choices that the Executive need to make. The limitations that I have acknowledged, be they related to the devolved spending settlement or to being in a power-sharing coalition, are all the more reason that we need a road map — a Programme for Government — to tell us as an Assembly, and the public more broadly, what the plan is and what is being delivered. Without one, as we have seen in the past, the Executive simply improvise from week to week and run on glossy PR and positive vibes. Those are welcome, but they cannot be a substitute for delivery in government.

I am sure that I am going to be accused of simply carping from the sidelines, but I am not, and neither is my party. I acknowledge the positive signs and the instances in which the Executive have made specific progress. I say, genuinely, that I welcome the positive symbolism and the strong imagery between the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. That has to be acknowledged, and I acknowledge it. I also say that the Economy Minister, who, as we know, is away for, hopefully, a brief hiatus, set out some clear themes on regional balance and a greater promotion of the all-island economy that he wants to pursue in his economic policy. That is to be welcomed. The Communities Minister has also made some progress and acted swiftly to help deliver legislation on defective premises. I am therefore willing to acknowledge where there has been progress made. What I am not going to do, however, is simply accept that we can have government that has no plan or road map and that drifts along, week to week, simply on the back of PR. I am afraid that that is what appears to be happening.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

12.45 pm

Mr O'Toole: I do not have much time left, so I will not give way. I will be happy to give way later in the proceedings.

All that we ask for is a plan — a road map. We are not asking for the earth or for miracles. The public of Northern Ireland have a right to expect that parties that have sought power and have successfully been elected to power have a plan and will tell them the choices that they will make to rescue our public services. That is all we ask. If the parties that have sought that power and have it cannot sign up to the motion —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — I do not know why they are in power in the first place.

Mr Harvey: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out from "regrets" to "office" and insert:

"further recognises that there is Executive agreement on priorities, including childcare, reducing hospital waiting lists, tackling violence against women and girls, special educational needs, housing, developing a globally competitive economy and reform and transformation of public services"

Mr Speaker: Mr Harvey, you have up to 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Harvey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the opposition motion and in support of the amendment.

The motion's opening text refers to the challenging financial situation faced by our constituents and by us all. The cost-of-living crisis continues to bite hard on family finances and government finances. Following the return of the institutions early in 2024, I have been heartened to see the energy in the Executive to meet those challenges head-on by taking immediate action in several key policy areas to begin to make a tangible difference to people's lives.

The immediate focus has been on the settling of pay disputes for public-sector workers and

rightly so. Civil servants, Health and Social Care (HSC) workers and teachers have been some of those to benefit from the £3.3 billion financial package that emanated from our negotiations with the Government. I am pleased to see the benefit beginning to be felt in people's pockets. I think also of some of the recent announcements by my colleague the Minister of Education, for instance, who is driving some of my party's key priorities. There is an acute need for school building programmes. The funding that he has now allocated to the new special educational needs (SEN) capital programme will make a massive difference to the lives of many families who struggle to meet the needs of an SEN child. The delivery of eight entirely new schools over the next 10 years, alongside extension and refurbishment programmes for mainstream schools, will be welcomed by a sector that urgently needs support to meet the ever-growing demand and prevalence of SEN in children and young people. Other recent announcements, such as £9 million for access to dentistry, alongside wider Executive agreement on a Budget for 2024-25 and the setting of the regional rate, all demonstrate a willingness to ensure that swift action is taken to meet the need and priorities that are being faced.

The motion goes on to call for a Programme for Government document, and, of course, we all support that. The Government have an obligation to set out their vision and priorities strategically, and I welcome the opportunity for the newly formed Opposition to scrutinise that. However, a document does not produce results, and it certainly does not equate to delivery. Many a document produced in this place has sat on the shelf gathering dust. Whilst I would not wish to make light of the necessity of a Programme for Government, I caution against fixation on it. The public are not particularly interested in policy documents; they are interested in delivery and the positive outcomes that emanate from the Chamber and tangibly impact their lives for the better. It is on an outcomes-based approach that the public will hold the Executive and individual Ministers to account. That is where our focus and that of the Opposition should lie with regard to accountability.

As I have outlined, the absence of such a document has not prevented Executive action and decision-making in several key policy areas so far. In addition, it should be noted that neither has it hindered the Executive from outlining some key priorities for the mandate, which include affordable childcare, the need for international economic investment —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Harvey: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Allister: The Member mentioned childcare: would he like to comment on the fact that the Executive were allocated £57.2 million for childcare in Barnett consequentials, but, in their wisdom, or otherwise, decided to spend only £25 million on childcare? How does that show a priority for childcare provision?

Mr Harvey: I thank the Member for his contribution.

We also think of the pollution in Lough Neagh and, more generally, combating pollution, among other issues.

It is important that time is taken by the Executive to draft a Programme for Government that not only addresses all the fundamental issues but garners the consensus required to produce a focused and agreed set of priorities. Agreement takes time, and agreement will be required if a Programme for Government is to have a meaningful and lasting impact for good.

Ms Bradshaw (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I will initially make a few remarks in my role as Chair of the Executive Office Committee. The motion is, naturally, of particular interest to the Committee in its oversight role. We need to stop the notion that we have to agree on every semicolon before we can publish a Programme for Government. We need to have a document urgently that outlines priorities, clarifies objectives and sets out a series of actions to achieve those. The Department's first-day brief referred to the lack of a Programme for Government as a knotty problem, but, frankly, we are all here to provide leadership, and we need to get on with it.

I need to put on record a view that the Executive Office is not yet functioning as it should be. One hundred days after restoration, we were supposed to see agreement on a published programme for memorials for the victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse (HIA) of children; public consultations on issues from truth recovery for mother-and-baby institutions to refugee integration; agreement on an international relations strategy; a draft investment strategy; and much else. The vital strategy for ending violence against women and girls is not yet approved, promised amendments to the ministerial code have not appeared and the review of Together: Building

a United Community (T:BUC) is not yet available.

Additionally, a vast range of appointments is still awaited. We are making public appointments without a Commissioner for Public Appointments, trying to address victims' issues without a Victims' Commissioner and allegedly progressing the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 without the relevant language and identity commissioners. That is perhaps unsurprising, given that the Department is still being run without a permanent secretary, despite the vacancy having occurred in September and interviews apparently having taken place in February.

As a Committee, we are also scrutinising the work of the Department frequently without papers having been provided in advance. We do not yet know the role of the junior Ministers. Frankly, it is all still rather dysfunctional. The fundamental point relevant to this debate is that the absence of a Programme for Government is frustratingly consistent with the performance of the Executive Office since February and the Ministers who head the Executive Office are responsible and accountable for that. Despite that, we know that there have been discussions around what should be in the Programme for Government. It should be human rights-compliant; it should have measurable outcomes; it should promote good relations; it should be trauma-informed; and it should reflect the voices of young people.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. We know that a Programme for Government can be difficult, with many competing priorities, particularly in the financial climate that we find ourselves in today. Has the Committee had an opportunity to review and, indeed, research the average length of time for a Programme for Government across legacy Executives, going back even to the time when the leader of the Opposition's party occupied the position of deputy First Minister?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank the Member for his intervention. We await confirmation of when the First Minister and deputy First Minister will return to the Committee and of when the junior Ministers will appear. At that stage, we will home in on the issue of a lack of a Programme for Government.

That counts for little, however, until it is actually published as the focus for policy and legislation for us as a Committee to scrutinise.

I will now make a few remarks as an Alliance MLA. The specific call on the First Minister and deputy First Minister is fairly framed, and we support it without reservation. The amendment is not entirely without merit, but it removes the specific call for the Programme for Government to be published. We want to see it published urgently.

Mr Kingston: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bradshaw: Go ahead.

Mr Kingston: Has the Member read the amendment? It does not interfere with the timescale. It still commits to the draft Programme for Government being published by the summer, so it asks only for recognition of the work that has been advanced. It does not change the timescale or the specific action in the motion.

Ms Bradshaw: I will reflect on that again. I did not think that that was the way that the amendment read. It picks out specific issues, and we know that the Executive have looked at others that have not been included. The point is that we would like to see the Programme for Government in its entirety, published even in draft form, so that we can look at everything that the Executive are laying out.

We have rehearsed the challenging fiscal situation to which the motion refers several times in the Chamber, but we need to be clear about two things. First, if anything, such a situation makes a Programme for Government only more urgent, as we need to be clear about what our priorities are. Secondly, if we want to make the case for more money for services, we need to be clear about what we will do with it.

Let me expand on the latter point. We hear from the COVID-19 inquiry that our system of government has learned nothing from the renewable heat incentive (RHI). We hear from countless inquiries into and reviews of our health and social care system that we are learning nothing from major patient safety failings.

The parties that provide the relevant Ministers are the same parties that opted to crash the Executive in 2017 and kept it crashed for most of the time since. They are responsible and accountable for the consequences of that too. The people of Northern Ireland are no longer

prepared to be thankful to Ministers merely for providing an Administration; they want, need and demand good government. There is a lot of work to catch up on and decisions to make, and that requires clear prioritisation, which is best delivered by a Programme for Government.

Ms Sheerin: I support and welcome the motion. It is important for us all as MLAs to take stock of what we want to see achieved in the mandate and to set out our priorities clearly. Obviously, a Programme for Government is fundamental to that.

At the beginning of the session, in February, we were in a challenging situation. We are all representatives of our areas, and we are all put here by the people. We work for and with the people. We know the issues that face our constituents, and we are human beings, so we see human suffering, and most of us will be moved by that and want to do something to help people.

The first thing that we achieved as a four-party Executive was a fair pay settlement for public-sector workers. That was in the challenging context of the Tory austerity that we have been living with for 14 years. I speak as an Irish republican, and my frustrations with that system and how this place is funded do not need to be rehearsed. We know that we are funded below need in the North and that that has been the case for a significant number of years. That is the context in which we operate.

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

As four parties working together and with help from those on the Opposition Benches — we welcome constructive costings, reflections and considerations — we know the things that face our constituents. We know the problems that people bring to us every day, whether they are about passports, potholes or more challenging situations, and the things that we want to give particular focus to. Those include solving the problems in the childcare sector and making childcare affordable for working families; increasing SEN provision so that the parents who come to us at their wits' end every summer telling us that their young child has not got a nursery or primary school place will find that that is no longer the situation; and ending violence against women and girls. We have all stood at the vigils and have bemoaned the fact that this is the second most dangerous place in Europe to be a woman. We want to end that and to see work on that delivered.

We want to build fair and appropriate housing. We want to solve the problems with our waiting lists. We all have constituents coming to our offices having waited for years for routine surgery, which is massively damaging their health. We want to work collaboratively with everyone in the Executive and all MLAs to solve those problems. We want to transform public services and build a better economy.

When it comes to any suggestions that people have regarding that or any work that we can do, Sinn Féin is committed to delivering for the people who put us here, and we want to work collaboratively with all MLAs to do that. The motion is important, and it is a good opportunity for us all to rededicate ourselves to the public service in which we operate.

1.00 pm

Mr Beattie: One has to ask, "Why can you not support the motion?", because it is factually correct. The Executive have been restored for 100 days. There are huge fiscal challenges facing the Executive. We have been underfunded, and we continue to be funded below need. Those are all facts. There was extensive engagement between the Executive political parties and the Northern Ireland Civil Service around a Programme for Government. We absolutely support the motion.

The amendment is absolutely factually correct as well. It lays out what we said in those negotiations would be our priorities. We can easily support the amendment. It does not negatively affect the main motion. We have no problem either way. It is clear, however, that a Programme for Government should be a foundation document for what we want to achieve as a Coalition Government with a long-term vision. It should be strategic and outcome-focused, not project-focused. It needs to be looked at in depth.

The Ulster Unionist Party has always had the stance that it is better to wait until a Programme for Government is agreed before running the d'Hondt process and forming the Executive. Therefore, people can go into government already knowing what the outcomes will be, and there is no more silo mentality. Funny enough, we could have achieved that. We disagreed with the boycott, but it gave us two years in which to approve a Programme for Government before we went in. We had the ability to have a Programme for Government up and running really quickly. In fact, if you look back to 2021, which was not that long ago, you will see that the previous Programme for Government went

out for public consultation between January and March 2021. That Programme for Government should have had longevity for the future. It should never have been a one-, two- or three-year Programme for Government; it should have been a five- or 10-year Programme for Government. The First Minister was the deputy First Minister at the time, and her signature is at the bottom of the consultation document, as is Arlene Foster's. The consultations between the political parties and the Northern Ireland Civil Service went on from June 2022 until January 2024. There was ample time to come up with a Programme for Government.

There absolutely are fiscal challenges, but every time anyone hints at trying to deal with those challenges or at revenue raising, it is closed down pretty quickly. If you agree an underfunding Budget, you accept an underfunding Budget. We did not; we could not. It will not work.

I agree with all the issues mentioned by the DUP. Every single one will require a resource, but we do not have that resource or the level of engagement within the Executive that we need now. The Executive have met about six times since they were re-established, but there has been no focus whatsoever on a Programme for Government. There have been side issues and some talk about it but absolutely nothing otherwise. There is a sense that TEO is a bit dysfunctional at the moment. I think that Paula Bradshaw outlined really well some of the issues that create that dysfunctionality.

There are multiple documents about a Programme for Government. I have them sitting here. They are very glossy, and they would have given us the ability to get up and running pretty quickly. There is even a document called 'Strategic Programme Timeline', which says that a Programme for Government should be out for consultation seven weeks after an Executive are up and running.

I will finish with this: my concern is that we will end up with a makeshift, one-year Programme for Government that will deal with projects only. It will deliver projects, and they will be good projects and the right projects. Childcare is absolutely the right project, as are special educational needs provision and efforts to dealing with waiting lists, but they have to be part of something much bigger than a project dealing with one issue or another. That is where we are lacking. I hope that the Programme for Government comes out soon. The Programme for Government should have informed the Budget, rather than the Budget informing the

Programme for Government. We got it the wrong way round.

I will happily support the motion — it is a good motion — and the amendment.

Mr Mathison: I support the motion. It is imperative that we have a Programme for Government that provides clarity, direction and transparency for the road to be travelled by the Northern Ireland Executive in this shortened mandate. After the unnecessary and damaging suspension of the institutions came to an end earlier this year, the opportunity for collaborative working between our Executive Ministers was restored. There is no doubt that the challenge facing every Minister is substantial. It includes ensuring fair pay for public-sector workers; the cost of childcare; health service transformation; delivering first-class education for our children; addressing the impact of the historical underfunding of our justice system; and addressing the environmental crisis at Lough Neagh. We have, however, been back for 100 days. A Budget has been announced, but we do not yet have a clear statement of what the Executive will prioritise or the outcomes that will be sought, which is how we measure performance across Departments. That is not the context that we should be operating in for the people of Northern Ireland.

It would be remiss of me not to recognise the fact that, as the motion highlights, we are in dire need of a fiscal framework that delivers the resource necessary to deliver fit-for-purpose public services. The Northern Ireland Fiscal Council showed that Northern Ireland's funding formula needs to be set at 124% per head compared with funding in England in order for us to deliver equally effective services. The Alliance Party has consistently argued that, due to a range of factors, that figure should be adjusted to 127%, not least to properly account for the cost of funding policing and justice in this place. A cycle of repeated short-term cash injections that provides a sticking plaster as we continue on a cycle of collapse and restoration will not be enough to sustain our finances. We need a proper funding settlement, a multi-year Budget and the ability to plan. That means that there must be no more stop-start government.

Whilst our Executive will, I hope, continue to push for that transformation of our funding model at Westminster, we need to see the ambition of our First Minister and deputy First Minister set out clearly, with clear signposts and indicators that will allow for proper accountability on delivery. A failure to set out a long-term vision for public policy in Northern

Ireland hurts only those who need it most. It undermines the work that is needed to help the most marginalised communities. As referenced by other contributors, we have not had a confirmed Programme for Government in over 10 years. That is not good enough, but it is, sadly, symptomatic of the instability of these institutions and indicative of the need to reform them in order to stabilise government in this place.

It takes leadership to set out a strategic direction for the Executive, not just an articulation of how much it costs to deliver public services. The public have a right to know what the Executive, collectively, seek to achieve: how we will get out of departmental silos and collaborate meaningfully to deliver for the public. We need a Programme for Government. Otherwise, we will run the risk of compounding silo mentalities and seeing budgets being distributed within Departments in a context disconnected from any overarching strategic priorities.

I am very happy to lend my support to the motion. I call on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to prioritise this work now so that this already shortened mandate does not become a missed opportunity to transform how we do government in Northern Ireland.

Mr Butler: The reinstatement of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland was a significant achievement that marked a critical moment in this region's journey towards stability and progress. As the Assembly commemorates the first 100 days since that milestone, it is imperative that we acknowledge the strides that we have made, many of which were recognised by the Members who have spoken so far. We are, however, operating in a financial landscape that confronts the Executive at every turn. That is a formidable challenge, particularly because it straddles every sector.

Acknowledging the underfunding of public services in Northern Ireland is not merely an observation; it is a clarion call for action, which is, I believe, also contained in the motion. Our communities deserve access to high-quality healthcare, education, infrastructure and all other essential services. The crisis in health funding and educational inequalities has been exacerbated by the pandemic, stop-start politics and systemic issues that demand immediate address. Waiting times for critical procedures, overstretched staff and under-resourced facilities in healthcare, alongside disparities in educational outcomes, which are rooted in socio-economic difference, are the hurdles that

the Executive and the Assembly must not overlook.

The spectre of crippling poverty, especially child poverty, looms large over Northern Ireland's future. The Executive must prioritise policies and initiatives that are aimed at lifting families out of destitution and furnish them with the support and resource that is requisite for flourishing. Addressing the root causes of poverty, encompassing access to affordable housing, employment opportunities and robust social support systems, is indispensable for fostering a more equitable society, which I believe a Programme for Government should be at the core of.

Disability inequalities represent another poignant challenge that warrants immediate attention. Persons with disabilities are confronted by obstacles to employment, education, healthcare and societal inclusion that perpetuate cycles of disadvantage and exclusion. The Executive's duty is to dismantle those barriers and cultivate a society in which every individual can participate fully and equitably. I know that we have had motions and that we are taking measures, but I believe that we need a printed, agreed Programme for Government to achieve that.

Furthermore, environmental failures, exemplified by the Lough Neagh algal bloom catastrophe, underscore the pressing need for environmental stewardship and sustainable development. The Executive must take decisive steps to mitigate pollution, safeguard natural habitats and advocate sustainable practices across all domains. Therefore, investing in renewable energy, conservation endeavours and environmental education is pivotal in safeguarding present and future generations. I know that we have a compressed mandate with, maybe, only two years left, but it would be remiss of us not to ensure that those things are included.

Amidst those challenges, the Executive's foremost task is the formulation and execution of a focused Programme for Government that recognises the compressed mandate. Such a programme should espouse an overarching ethos of well-being and prosperity across every priority and outcome. It must not only identify key objectives but delineate concrete strategies and allocate resources judiciously. Every policy initiative and decision must be scrutinised through a lens of fostering well-being and prosperity for all the citizens of Northern Ireland.

One critical area where the Executive have faltered is in ensuring that the social housing stock and its quality meet the burgeoning demand. The failure to adequately address that issue has left many families languishing in inadequate or unaffordable housing, exacerbating issues of homelessness, poverty and social inclusion. I am sure that those of you who were listening to the radio this morning will have heard testimony to that. It is imperative that the Executive redouble their efforts to expand and improve the social housing inventory, ensuring that it meets the needs of all citizens and contributes to the well-being and prosperity of Northern Ireland as a whole.

In conclusion, as Northern Ireland and its people reflect on the restoration of the devolved institutions, the Executive must confront the formidable challenges that lie ahead with resolve and determination. By delivering a focused Programme for Government that is rooted in an ethos of well-being and prosperity, addressing pressing issues such as health funding, educational inequalities, poverty, disability disparities, environmental sustainability and social housing, the Executive can chart a course towards a brighter and more inclusive future for all.

Ms Nicholl: I thank the Opposition for tabling this important motion. A Programme for Government is not just desirable but vital. It allows the Executive to set out their future vision, to establish a set of key priorities and to give the public and MLAs a basis on which to judge the success or otherwise of the Executive.

In a shortened mandate, it must be acknowledged that there have been a wide range of immediate pressures and challenges for all Executive Ministers in the first 100 days since restoration. However, it is deeply regrettable that we are only into the first 100 days of this place being up and running. Had we been able to form a Government in the days following the 2022 Assembly election, when this mandate should have begun, we would have been two years into a functioning Government — two years further into making the transformative change that our public services require and that our constituents deserve, and two years further into delivery on a wide range of very important issues.

On that, the amendment lists a range of issues that urgently need to be progressed, but there are also a huge range of other issues that must be prioritised, including adequate funding for DAERA to deliver on the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and the significant

underfunding of Justice relative to other Departments for many years.

1.15 pm

For Alliance, the fact that we are only 100 days into the mandate further underlines the need for reform of our institutions, as my colleague outlined. We must never again find ourselves in the position of having been without a Government for five of the past seven years. That was totally unacceptable and has created a challenging environment for all Ministers, given that decision-making was put on hold for the past two years. Nobody in this place is under any illusions. We cannot do everything that we would like to do, especially in a shortened mandate, with two years of wasted time already behind us.

There is hope, however, if we can take the serious steps that are required to transform services and deliver real impact for the people whom we serve. Our Programme for Government cannot be simply about putting more money into every Department. While it is essential that we see services funded according to need and that the UK Government live up to their analysis of the lack of funding received by Northern Ireland, we need to see serious plans for the long-term transformation of services across government.

Connected to that, we must become much more serious about ending silo working. Government by silo has failed us all and must be brought to an end. We must be bolder and more ambitious about the cross-departmental working and collaboration that is possible. To be truly outcomes-driven and genuinely focused on delivering the best results for Northern Ireland, we must be able to step outside the narrow confines of our Departments and see the bigger picture. I see that most clearly in my work every day on education and on delivery for our children and young people. That is particularly clear when we look at early years education, childcare and the ongoing crisis for children with SEND. The independent review of education states:

"The life of a child from 0 to 4 years old (and beyond ...) does not operate within public service boundaries or silos. It is essential that health and education services (and others) work hand in hand for these vital years."

That means collaborative working on policy development, service delivery and funding. The Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015 can

be activated and utilised to pool resources and funding for the purpose of delivering children's services. The legislation is there, but its potential has never been realised, and that is shameful. The Act includes a requirement for the Programme for Government to consider the issues raised in the report on the operation of the Act. That must be part of the incoming Programme for Government.

The independent review of education states:

"Early years services are an investment by society in its future."

It further states that we have a duty to see investment in early years as:

"an investment for the long term."

If we are serious about improving outcomes and delivering for a better Northern Ireland, we need to get serious about investing in our children. That includes delivering ambitious programmes for high-quality, accessible and affordable childcare.

I firmly believe that, if we are to make a success of the time remaining in the mandate, we need to place a renewed focus on areas in which we can have the most significant impact. Investment in genuine collaborative working for the sake of our children and young people will not only deliver better value for money but, the research suggests, improve outcomes for the next generation. If our Programme for Government is to be ambitious about anything, it should be about creating a better society in which our children and young people can grow, learn and thrive. Our Programme for Government must come forward at pace and set out a clear and comprehensive vision for the future transformation of public services in Northern Ireland.

Mr McGrath:

"I know that we have many shared priorities, and those will be reflected today, but we must deliver more. We must deliver more on affordable childcare to support workers and families, and more on social and affordable homes, because everybody has the right to call somewhere their home. We must transform our health and social care system and ensure that children with additional needs have first-class support." — [Official Report, Vol 153, No 1, p14, col 2].

Those are not my words but those of Michelle O'Neill, when she took up the role of First Minister on 3 February.

"We can agree that too many mummies, and some daddies, are having to give up work because childcare is too expensive. We agree that our teachers need to be supported and equipped to teach and that our public-sector workers need to be properly paid." — [Official Report, Vol 153, No 1, p16, col 2].

Those are not my words but those of Emma Little-Pengelly, when she took up the role of deputy First Minister on 3 February. Those words show strong aspirations, great ideals and a collective spirit and willingness to work together for a shared outcome. That is exactly what the people of Northern Ireland need at this difficult time, when our politics have been stagnant for two years, we have just emerged from a deadly pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis remains in situ. There was just one thing missing from the contribution of any of the Executive parties: a plan, a road map to get us from A to B and help us to see those priorities being delivered. I will be the first to say that photo opportunities were important: people needed to see our Executive as a single unit. However, there is a point when the Executive must park the photo ops and get on with the job of delivering, serving the public and meeting their aspirations and ideals.

Just over two years ago, the four Executive parties set out their priorities in their manifestos: 'Build a Better Northern Ireland'; 'Together We Can'; 'Real Action on the Issues That Matter to You'; and 'Time for Real Change'. Is Northern Ireland any better after 100 days? "Together" — did you? Has there been any action on the issues that matter to the public or just the ones that matter to the Executive parties? Is it, "Time for Real Change", or has it been, "More of the same, and let's not be in a hurry"?

For two years, the Executive parties met, and we all believed that they were discussing the Budget and a Programme for Government. When that became apparent, the SDLP left those discussions because it would not have been proper for an Opposition party to be part of the Budget discussions. It is not the job of the Opposition to do the Executive's work for them. Yet, here we are today, doing just that. We have laid bare the issues that the Executive parties promised on. They promised delivery for parents, public-sector workers — all of them — and working families across the North. To date, they have failed to deliver on their promises.

Who is to blame? Well, it must be the Tories' fault, because they have not given us enough money. Yet, in the last 100 days, Executive parties have collectively racked up a bill of £1.5

billion in the motions that they have proposed. In my local newspapers, I see Executive party representatives demanding everything in the area, including the full restoration of everything in our local hospital, yet they know that they do not have the money to deliver on that.

In 100 days, we will be at the tail end of August, with children preparing to go back to school. What do the Executive say to parents who are trying to sort out their childcare? What do the Executive say to the public-sector workers trying to afford school uniforms? What do the Executive say to the working families across the North whose children need a special educational needs placement? The public should not have to wait a single day longer. Delivery aside, it is time for some answers from the Executive.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up, Colin.

Mr McGrath: Where is the Programme for Government?

Mr McCrossan: My colleague has rightly articulated the challenges faced by people across Northern Ireland and the continuous wishful thinking by some of the Executive parties in the House. There has been a litany of promises made to the public time and again, and one crisis or another — all manufactured by this place, of course — has distracted from the fact that the Executive have continually failed to deliver on priorities for the people across our communities.

We know the state of the health service. We know the challenges that exist and the huge impact they have on people across our communities. There is real human suffering as a consequence of the political failures of this place. Following the return of the institutions after two years of collapse, without any proper justification for an absence of government in this place, there is still no sight of a Programme for Government or any indication of the direction of travel for the Executive. What is happening? Simple conversations, photo shoots, motions and wish lists — all the things that make people look good on videos — but no substance whatever. There is more huge frustration playing out in the community. The Executive may think that they can continue bluffing the electorate that they are working hard to deliver on their needs, when, in reality, nothing is changing on the ground.

Poverty is a massive challenge for our community. It has touched many families in my

constituency and, indeed, in the constituency of every Member. Yet we see no meaningful action whatever and no clear plan, indication or otherwise for how we will resolve the most simple of demands: the need to ensure that our children can be fed, live in a good, warm home and have the necessary support to meet their basic needs in society. The reality is that the Executive are not interested in those things, because, if they are not fighting with themselves and causing continuous crisis and collapse, they are finding excuses or someone to blame for the absence of delivery.

Colleagues in the House are quick to blame the Tories and have been for 10 years. Yes, there is the issue relating to how this place is financed, and there is a huge shortfall that affects how we tackle some of the challenges that we face in the health service, education and housing. Those arguments are well rehearsed. However, a basic necessity is the existence of a Government working in tandem to resolve, not create, problems. The cost of collapse has been astronomical, and it has worsened an already serious situation in Northern Ireland. It has worsened the levels of child poverty. It has worsened the impact on special educational needs children. It has worsened the situation for dementia patients across Northern Ireland, as we have heard in the House today. It has worsened the housing lists. We hear about the First Minister tweeting instead of talking to Executive colleagues about the challenges that exist in education. That is petty.

Mr McNulty: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: I will in a second.

The Executive are a coalition of four parties that are there to work together to resolve problems. Instead, what we have had in the first 100 days is the First Minister tweeting another Executive Minister about a failure to deliver on an issue. Then we see the most senior Ministers in the Executive tweeting about what they would like to see happen. They have the power to deliver on those promises and priorities. Let us get a reality check, folks: not everything can be a priority, strange as that may seem.

We need to ensure that the basic needs of our society are met and that we put an end to the continuous suffering of our people. Nobody from the Executive parties can sit in the House today and honestly outline what they have delivered for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland since the Assembly was re-established. It is not good enough simply to be here. It is not good enough simply to be seen to

be working together. People expect more. They deserve more and must have more from the Executive.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that a Programme for Government is essentially a prioritised, time-bound to-do list for the governing parties or a road map with a timeline for where they are going and when they will get there? Does he also agree that, without a Programme for Government, the questions for the governing parties are these: who is on the bus; who is driving the bus; and where is the bus going?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry, your time is up, even though you were supposed to get an extra minute. That normally has to be taken before the time is up. Sorry about that, Daniel. You will know for the next time.

Mr Butler: He missed the bus. *[Laughter.]*

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I did not want to say that; it would have been churlish. However, you did.

Mr Allister: Given the unbridled hype that accompanied the return of the Executive, I am sure that the gullible who expected 100 days to mark a celebration of delivery will be greatly disappointed. I cannot say that I am at all surprised, because we have been here so many times before. "Always high on promise but low on delivery": that is the epitaph of every Executive there has ever been in this place. Since we came back, there has been no legislation, no Budget, no Programme for Government and no strategy.

Yes, there are plenty of aspirational motions and demands for money, but there is nothing of substance from those who call themselves a Government. Maybe there is no surprise in that, because, when you look at the unredacted, undeleted messages of Mr David Sterling in the COVID inquiry — he was maybe in a better position than most to see how our Executives work — you will find one of the things that he said of the previous Executive, which had the same people and the same parties. He said that they were not capable of analysing and understanding complex issues. Yes, they are good at fiddling the minutes but hopeless in government. That is the essential verdict from that source.

1.30 pm

Then there is openness and transparency. "What is that?", Ministers might say. "What is that strange foreign idea — openness and transparency? Away with that. We do not want any of that. We are the people who told the civil servants this: do not take notes, because they will only be FOI-ed."

Of course, it is not all failure. On photo ops, it is an A*, with the unelected deputy First Minister winning the BAFTA for excelling at camogie. The Opposition should not be surprised that there are no policies, strategy or Programme for Government. My goodness, when you have endless photo opportunities to attend to, you have no time for those lesser things — of course you have not.

The Executive also excel at begging bowl politics — 10 out of 10 on that score. Blaming the Brits? Another BAFTA, with the DUP as the best supporting actor. Implementing EU colonial rule? First-class serfs when it comes to that, with any chance of scrutiny scuppered by expunging the Assembly's scrutiny powers over the Irish Sea border. Meanwhile, we have that most false of all false promises that brought the DUP back here. "Zero checks, zero paperwork" rings out as a seismic reminder of just how dishonest that party was prepared to be in order to get back into this failed Executive.

When a Programme for Government comes, no doubt it will exalt the Casement Park project, which is spending endless money with no return for the taxpayer. It is an asset to the GAA, but there is no return to the taxpayer through its future use.

Mr Honeyford: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Allister: Yes, I will take one.

Mr Honeyford: The Member just said that there would be no tax return or gain for the public, but that is fundamentally untrue. There is 20% VAT on every ticket and there are rates to be paid, and that does not happen in other parts of the UK. Would the Member care to elaborate on how there will be no tax coming back?

Mr Allister: I most certainly will. There will be a 100% return to the GAA on every concert or outside event that is held in Casement Park. There will be no return to the Executive, which may have put in hundreds of millions before this is over. There will be no return whatsoever. It is an asset that bestows that money-spinning opportunity on the GAA with no legacy

whatsoever for football. That will be the abiding legacy of this hopeless, failing Executive.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Are you finished? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: To your delight, I am.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: OK. Thank you, Mr Allister. I call the deputy First Minister, Emma Little-Pengelly, to respond. You have 15 minutes, Minister.

Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First Minister): Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. On taking office, the First Minister and I pledged to work with all parties across the Executive and the Assembly to confront the challenges that we face and capitalise on the many opportunities on offer to deliver a better future for everyone living in Northern Ireland. When we did so, we were fully aware of the challenges that we faced, particularly in relation to the difficult financial situation that all the Departments and the Executive would have to deal with. I am pleased that, over the past 100 days, we have been delivering on that promise. I welcome the fact that my words were referenced. I am in this post to support people and hard-working families throughout Northern Ireland. I support the transformation that we need to fix health and education, and I want to make sure that our public services work for the people of Northern Ireland.

What have we been doing over the past 100 days? We started work immediately, having discussions about key priorities. I am very pleased that, at the very first Executive meeting, we set out our five key priorities. Reference was made to what I said in my acceptance speech in the House. It was about recognising the hardship that is faced by families in relation to access to affordable childcare. What did we do? We tasked the Education Minister to immediately establish a task and finish group of officials. That was done. We await key initial actions to support hard-pressed families in relation to childcare. Those will be published very shortly.

We recognised that, throughout Northern Ireland, our hard-working public-sector workers were not getting the pay that they needed, so what did we do? We did not dither; we took action immediately. Our number-one priority was to set a financial package of some £688 million. That fiscal envelope was set quickly to enable Ministers to negotiate and settle those pay disputes.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: That is what has happened with the vast majority of those pay disputes. I welcome that, because do you know what that is? That is £688 million going into the pockets of hard-working public-sector workers throughout Northern Ireland. I am glad to say that some of them will have seen that additional pay in their pay packet this month. That pay will be used to support other industries, businesses and families throughout Northern Ireland. That is a really important first step. It could not have happened without the additional money being secured through those negotiations, and it could not have happened as quickly without quick and decisive action by the Executive to ensure that —

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: — that envelope was put in place and those settlements could be reached. Ministers have been quick to ensure that those pay settlements could be reached, but we recognise that a small number are still outstanding, and we give a commitment to continuing to address them.

Before I take any interventions, I will run through a number of things. It is not an exhaustive list, but I will highlight some of the things that we have done. There was the pay settlement of £688 million for public-sector workers throughout Northern Ireland. In a difficult situation for our Executive, we have agreed a Budget for 2024. We have been to the USA, where we promoted Northern Ireland and business in Northern Ireland. It was a very successful visit. We established, and attended for the first time in London, the East-West Council. The North/South Ministerial Council has already met. We have agreed a meeting of the British-Irish Council, which will take place in June. There was the announcement of some £9.4 million of payments to environmental farming scheme participants, which have already commenced. There was immediate action in relation to the Victoria Square apartments. We successfully pushed for Northern Ireland to be included in the Post Office scheme relating to the Horizon scandal. We have allocated an additional £1 million for libraries and £3 million of additional funding in the Supporting People programme. A £20 million energy support payment has been made to businesses. There has been action in relation to flooding payments. A £5 million programme has been launched for entrepreneurs and high-growth start-ups. There is £1 million of additional financial support for students in

hardship. Our Education Minister has ensured that those who need special educational needs school places will have them for the start of September. He has also announced special educational needs capital builds, which will make a real difference in the delivery of education where it is needed. We have opened the Limavady shared education campus. Indeed, the Executive have agreed and secured funding for the Strule shared education campus. Measures to address MOT waiting times have been announced and taken. More may well need to be done, but that action has commenced. An additional £8 million for potholes was secured. We know how difficult that situation is throughout Northern Ireland, but that additional £8 million is already starting to roll out. I can go on and on and on, because we have secured many things.

While we have been doing that, we have been working on our Programme for Government. Of course, it is an important and essential step in what we need to do, but we also must be fully aware of the challenges that we face. When it comes to our Budget, our priority is clear. Of course, it must be to ensure that our public services are working — our core public services of health and education and what we do currently. We have all discussed here how difficult the Budget has been and will be for those core services. Yes, there is much, much more that we all want to do. While the leader of the Opposition references motions, of course, it was ever thus. Of course, we support the thrust of those motions, but we are also realistic. When we talk about prioritisation, within our Budget, keeping our core public services going will be the priority, and we know how difficult that is when we look at the Department of Education budget and, indeed, all budgets across the Executive. Yes, we have taken action. This has been an Executive of delivery. Perhaps we need to explain that more and say it more loudly. I have touched on just a number of the issues, and they represent significant delivery in just 100 days.

I want to respond to some of the points raised during the debate. I will start with the leader of the Opposition. Of course, a Programme for Government is essential, and that is what we are working on. The Programme for Government will represent where there is consensus across the Executive. I also gently say to the leader of the Opposition that when we look at the history of this place, we will see that a Programme for Government has never been produced within the first 100 days. Indeed, when his party took the deputy First Minister post for the restoration in 1999, there was some instability. When I say instability,

after it came back in 1999, there were three months of suspension, but it was restored again in June 2000 with an SDLP/ Ulster Unionist-led Executive. However, the draft Programme for Government was produced in March 2001, and the final Programme for Government was agreed on 24 September 2001, so considerable time was taken, and that was because we need to get these things right. Yes, I want to see a Programme for Government quickly. Of course, I do, but it has to be right.

The leader of the Opposition mentioned that, until there is a Programme for Government, we are improvising. We are not improvising. We recognise that we must dedicate that time and energy to improving our core public services. We know what they are. It is not improvising. We know that they are in Education and Health. It is about roads, schools and special educational needs. Above and beyond those, an additional area of prioritisation is affordable childcare, because that is putting such pressures on families. We need to get to the point where we have at least the same standard of support as the rest of the UK. Of course, we want to go further than that, but, again, we are all realistic about what we can do.

My colleague mentioned a range of issues for prioritisation, and I welcome the fact that he recognised that five priorities were set, including special educational needs, health waiting lists, settling the public-sector pay claims and the action on Lough Neagh, which I did not mention, but the Executive agreed to put aside an additional just under £2 million for immediate actions on Lough Neagh this year. The first Minister and I visited Lough Neagh to hear directly from those most impacted.

I absolutely agree with him that childcare is a big challenge, but why is it so difficult to prioritise our Budget? We all know — we have debated it in the Chamber — that our health costs are higher per head of population than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. We have higher levels of special educational need than any other place across these islands, and funding for that has to come from our Budget. It is understandable that we have to make difficult decisions, but, of course, we have to prioritise those core needs as well.

1.45 pm

The Chair of the TEO Committee made her contribution while wearing two hats, one of which was that of Committee Chair. On the work in the Department that she touched on, when we look at any analysis of public

policymaking in our Departments, there may be criticism in terms of not getting things out the door very quickly, but I gently say to the Chairperson that the scrutiny role is absolutely essential. I will not be ashamed to stand here and say that appropriate time must be taken to ask the right questions, get the right responses and ensure that the policies and the procedures for what we do are the right ones. The thing is not how quickly we can shove something out the door so that we do not get criticism from anybody; the key thing is that what we do makes a difference and is actually right. I will absolutely defend taking the time to ask the right questions on policy development, because this is the stage at which to do so, and I know that the Committee will help us to do that.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you for giving way, deputy First Minister. Do you defend the fact that the Committee frequently, including last week, does not get any papers to allow us to scrutinise the work that is going into the policy development?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I absolutely agree that you must be given that information in a timely way. We will address that and ensure that you get that.

As the Chairperson is aware, however, the Executive Office has responsibility for a wide range of issues. Those issues, some of which are very tricky, will have to be scrutinised. The Chairperson mentioned that she expected an announcement on memorials for historical institutional abuse victims, but she has also, in correspondence with us, indicated that she recognises the challenges in achieving consensus on that issue. We want to make sure that we move forward in a victim-centred way, ensuring that the victims and survivors — those who are most impacted — are content with the way forward. That takes time.

Doug Beattie mentioned his party's full support of the motion but said that he did not simply want a one-year PFG: I absolutely agree with him. It is important that we have immediate actions. While we can announce our key strategic priorities and, perhaps, our early actions in a draft document, we are fully aware that we need longer-term transformation. Our health service, our education system and the way in which we do public-sector policy and roll out our public services here require significant transformation. That will require us to get the right interventions and ensure that those interventions and the programme of transformation and transition are rolled out in such a way as to get the outcome that we want.

I welcome Nick Mathison's recognition that this should be a priority for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. I assure him absolutely that it is. We are working on it week in and week out, and our intention is to get a draft out as soon as possible and certainly before the summer. We have said so to the House on many occasions; that is the intention.

I welcome the comments from my Lagan Valley colleague Robbie Butler on a wide range of issues, particularly on ensuring that the Programme for Government works for everyone: those who suffer discrimination; those with particular challenges; and those with additional needs. It is important that that is fully integrated into all the actions. We must ensure that our public services work for everyone throughout Northern Ireland and that growing the economy here works for everyone.

I am going to run out of time, so I will conclude by simply saying that I want this Executive to be known for delivery. It is not about photographs or photo opportunities. It is about supporting people and getting out there, ensuring that people know that the Executive are determined to work in a positive way for everyone. The Executive will be about delivery, and I will ensure that.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Brian Kingston to wind up on the amendment. Brian, you have five minutes.

Mr Kingston: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank all Members for their contribution to the debate.

I ask Members to note that our amendment replaces just one clause of the Opposition party's motion and does so to highlight the fact that the Executive have agreed many of the key priorities for the mandate. Agreed priorities include childcare; reducing hospital waiting lists; tackling violence against women and girls; special educational needs; housing; developing a globally competitive economy; and the reform and transformation of public services. Indeed, a number of allocations in the recent Budget will enable delivery on those commitments, including £25 million for childcare and £300 million for reducing hospital waiting lists.

I hope that the leader of the Opposition will accept our factual amendment to the motion, in keeping with his party's pledge to provide positive opposition and not just negative criticism. Our amendment does not alter the key action point in the SDLP motion, which is:

"publishing a Programme for Government or a summary of key planned Programme for Government outcomes before the Assembly summer recess."

Indeed, that is expected to happen, with a view to consultation taking place over the summer months. Work is therefore continuing on the drafting of a Programme for Government.

It is fair to point out that the absence of a final document has not prevented the Executive from agreeing a Budget, settling pay disputes, as my colleague Harry Harvey set out, and establishing a public-sector transformation board. It is also fair to say that many countries take much longer to produce Programmes for Government, such as the Netherlands, Belgium and Italy, to name but a few. My colleague the deputy First Minister pointed out that, when the SDLP was a leading party in the Executive along with the Ulster Unionist Party, it took 21 months for them to get to the stage at which a draft Programme for Government was published, albeit there was a three-month suspension during the period. It is important to get such things right, to build consensus and to produce a focused and agreed set of priorities, but we are well down that route.

My party, the DUP, is seeking to prioritise the priorities set out in our manifesto for the Assembly election of 2022. We made a strong commitment to increasing childcare provision to help working families, and that has received increased resource in the Assembly Budget. We also committed to addressing the rising level of special educational need in our schools. As Members will be aware, the Education Minister announced two weeks ago his plans to support additional SEN units in schools, as well as building a number of new, dedicated SEN schools. The Communities Minister will shortly bring forward a housing supply strategy, which, I know, is a priority for all Members, not just those of us on the Communities Committee.

I will comment briefly on some of the points made during the debate. Matthew O'Toole accepted that progress had been made on defective premises legislation. He said that the SDLP wants to provide positive opposition. I have to say that, after listening to a couple of his colleagues, it remains to be seen where the SDLP will pitch itself and whether it wants just to be critical all the time or genuinely wants to recognise where progress is being made and play a more positive role. It is easy always to be like Mr McGrath and Mr McCrossan and be a double act of continuous criticism, but we want to see more positivity in the workings of the Assembly.

I welcome Doug Beattie's confirmation that the Ulster Unionist Party will support the DUP amendment and the fact that he recognises that it does not change the timescale, which is the critical action in the motion. Nick Mathison referenced the difficult financial circumstances in which we are all trying to operate and said that Northern Ireland is not funded at a level commensurate with need. Kate Nicholl reminded us of the need for a transformation of services —

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

Mr Kingston: — that can increase outcomes delivery with the same financial input.

Again, we ask that our amendment be supported. It does not change in any substantial way the purpose of the motion.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Matthew, this relates to you, probably. You have 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech, but there is not 10 minutes left, so I propose to suspend the debate until after Question Time to ensure that you get your full 10 minutes. I also propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

Mr Durkan: [*Inaudible*] five minutes [*Inaudible*.]

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I can read the clock, Mark, even with my glasses on. Go raibh maith agat as sin. [*Translation: Thank you for that.*]

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.55 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

FICT Report: Recommendations and Proposals

1. **Mr Dickson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline any steps they have taken to implement the recommendations and proposals of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) final report, since 3 February 2024. (AQO 395/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First Minister): The Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition, otherwise referred to as FICT, concluded its work and provided its final report to Ministers on 17 July 2020. A series of next steps, including a FICT implementation plan, was approved by the Executive on 25 March 2021. On 1 April 2021, initial engagement of Departments was approved by Ministers. On 22 April 2024, officials met junior Ministers to discuss matters relating to the report and the possible way forward. Officials are now preparing a submission on the back of that engagement, which is expected to set out a number of options for consideration regarding the next steps on the report and its recommendations.

Mr Dickson: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. Given that the commission does not support the status quo with regard to flags and emblems on public property, and the fact that you have now had over four years since the initiation of that report in which to take action, what action will your Department actually take to deal with flags on public property?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. There was consensus on a number of the commission's recommendations. We hope to be able to move forward with consensus on some of those, but we await the submission and advice from officials. Inevitably, there will be other aspects of the report on which there is no consensus. We will engage on all the recommendations and assess how we can move forward. The key issue is that we are waiting for that submission, recommendation and advice from officials at this stage.

Ms Ní Chuilín: In short: you are waiting on the submission on the FICT implementation plan. When do you anticipate its coming forward? Will it be before or after the summer recess?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I am always acutely aware when I respond to questions on that area that it deals with a number of tricky and contentious issues on which there has been no consensus since the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, nor was there consensus before. We are aware that the officials' advice is at an advanced stage, and we anticipate getting that in the next short while. We will work through it and have those discussions absolutely in good faith. We do anticipate getting it prior to the summer recess.

Mr Kingston: How important is it to be respectful of our various cultures and identities in Northern Ireland, particularly as we move into the main parading season?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. Of course, the right to freedom of expression is a fundamental human right and one that must be respected by us all. The right to be able to explore, learn about and express all our identities, including in the public space, is precious in our society. I absolutely believe that to be essential. The Executive Office has responsibility for a number of those issues around fundamental human rights. I hope that we can all move to a space where we show that respect to one another, including for parading and other traditions.

Mr McGrath: What does the deputy First Minister have to say to my constituents who have unwanted flags flying outside their homes for the whole summer? Will she commit to including a legal framework for removing those flags in the Programme for Government, whether we get it this summer or not?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware from the debate on that issue in the past number of weeks that there is no consensus on that recommendation from FICT. Of course, the commission itself did not have consensus on that recommendation either.

Programme for Government: Timescale

2. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline when a Programme for Government will be presented to the Assembly. (AQO 396/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: We are working at pace with Executive colleagues to develop and agree a Programme for Government. We hope to publish a draft for consultation in the coming weeks, which will be brought to the Assembly for scrutiny. It will reflect the need to reform and transform public services and will set out our collective priorities for the mandate. We are keen to bring forward a draft Programme for Government as soon as possible.

Mr O'Toole: We could spend all day talking about your definition of "pace", deputy First Minister. It might not be quite the same kind of pace that we saw at the North West 200 at the weekend, by all appearances. Since the debate that we have just been having on the Opposition day motion is about publishing either a Programme for Government or a summary of actions and outcomes by the summer, will you commit now to our having, by the summer recess, one of those two documents, that is, either the full Programme for Government or the summary of outcomes?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. As indicated, our intention is to publish a draft Programme for Government as soon as possible and certainly before the summer recess.

Mrs Mason: I welcome the deputy First Minister's confirmation that work is ongoing at pace with Executive colleagues to develop and agree a Programme for Government. Will the deputy First Minister confirm that the provision of affordable childcare remains a core Executive commitment?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Absolutely. As I outlined in my remarks in the debate, affordable childcare is undoubtedly a priority not just for the First Minister and me, which we have said many times, but, I believe, for the entire Executive. There are challenges with the Budget situation that we are in, but it is absolutely right that that development of an affordable childcare strategy started immediately, and it did. It was discussed at the first Executive meeting, and the task-and-finish group, which the Department of Education leads, was established in those first number of weeks. That group is due to publish, respond and make its recommendations to the Education Minister, who will bring forward immediate actions very shortly. Of course, the longer-term strategy will require co-production and co-design. It has to be the right strategy with the right interventions, and we want to have that as quickly as we can.

Mrs Erskine: Work is happening in the Executive on a number of matters, and, even in the absence of a Programme for Government, the Executive have taken a number of important decisions. Will the deputy First Minister outline some of those?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. I echo what I said in the debate. Almost £700 million of funding has gone out for public-sector pay settlements into the pockets of hard-working public-sector workers, who deserved that pay rise before. I am glad that they will now be getting it. Some of them will have received it in this month's pay. We have made decisions on ring-fencing £1.9 million for Lough Neagh and immediate interventions. We have secured £8 million of additional funding for dealing with potholes. We have secured the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the Post Office Horizon payment scheme and have dealt with many, many other issues, including securing Executive agreement to a Budget, despite the very difficult circumstances that we find ourselves in. This has been an Executive that, thus far, have been about delivery. We will continue to deliver while properly taking the right time to develop and ensure that we are making the right interventions. We will be about delivery, and I will ensure that that is the case.

Ms Nicholl: I welcome your commitment to childcare being in the Programme for Government. Deputy First Minister, will you confirm that preschool is not childcare and that any schemes that are developed will take learnings from the failed three-hours model in the UK?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. Affordable childcare is an area that I have been working on for many years. It has been a frustrating journey, but there is no doubt that preschool, nursery care and other interventions can support families with the affordability of their childcare. We need a comprehensive affordable childcare strategy, and it is important that there are many different elements of that that fit in. That includes child education and child development. All those elements can be helpful, but, of course, we need that comprehensive childcare strategy, and the First Minister and I are determined to ensure that this Executive deliver that.

THRiVE Project

3. **Mr Mathison** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their Department's engagement with the THRiVE project in Newtownabbey. (AQO 397/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Building on the success of Urban Villages, our officials have had regular engagement with THRiVE, as we recognise its positive impact on good relations and how it could be used as a model for taking a more collaborative approach to improving outcomes. Representatives from THRiVE have spoken to a number of cross-departmental groups to highlight their experience in order to help to inform our approach to place-based working. TEO has joined other Departments in contributing funding to THRiVE and becoming a member of its programme board. Good relations officials are reviewing that return on investment, which, I have to say, looks positive, with a view to considering further funding in the 2024-25 financial year.

Mr Mathison: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. Having visited the THRiVE project recently, I am highlighting it as an exemplar of good practice in place-based collaboration. With that in mind, will the deputy First Minister detail how her office will learn from the THRiVE project to ensure that there is genuine collaboration between Departments in this mandate, including the pooling of resources to deliver on key projects?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. I was an early convert to and enthusiast for place-based interventions, particularly through the Urban Villages initiative. Good and positive work has been done through Urban Villages and projects like THRiVE. We absolutely must learn the lessons from that and take a joined-up and collaborative approach, working hand in hand. The incredible Monkstown Boxing Club, which I had the privilege of visiting a few years ago, is another example. They are great community organisations rolling out fantastic projects. We must learn from and build on that.

Mr Delargy: I appreciate that the Minister has already touched on this, but will she give more detail on any consideration of future delivery of the Urban Villages project?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. The Executive Office budget has been incredibly difficult. We requested £7 million of additional revenue, particularly to support our good relations and ending violence against women and girls strategies. Unfortunately, we were able to secure only £1 million of additional funds. When you take into account inflationary increase and other pressures, that does not leave a significant amount of headroom. Of course, our good relations strategy and interventions are vital.

Urban Villages is one where we have had very good learning. We are actively considering the way forward, particularly around the place-based intervention model. We hope to come forward with proposals. We will consult the Committee on those to forge the new programme.

Windsor Framework: Veterinary Medicines

4. **Mr Elliott** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline any discussions that their representatives in Brussels have had with EU officials in relation to the provisions in the Windsor framework relating to veterinary medicines. (AQO 398/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Our officials in Brussels engage with the EU on issues relating to the provisions of the Windsor framework through its governance structures. The movement of veterinary medicines from Great Britain to Northern Ireland is now subject to the direction and control of the Secretary of State, as provided for in regulation 3 of the Windsor Framework (Implementation) Regulations 2024. Northern Ireland officials attend fora, including the Specialised Committee on Implementation of the Windsor Framework, the joint consultative working group and structured groups as part of the UK delegation. Under the respective rules of procedure, those meetings are confidential. However, where officials have had informal discussions with EU officials, that has also been to provide factual and technical background information in relation to the issue.

Mr Elliott: I thank the deputy First Minister. I appreciate that a lot of matters are confidential. A resolution was found to the human medicines issue at an early stage. Was an opportunity missed at that stage to do the same for veterinary medicines?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Undoubtedly, the European Union has taken a particular stance in relation to veterinary medicines. I assure the Member that, at the UK intergovernmental ministerial groups that I have participated in, I have raised this issue as an absolute priority at every opportunity. I know that the farming community and vets are very concerned. It has to be resolved. No Member, no matter from which party, should underestimate the significance of the issue not being resolved. This is an urgent issue, and I hope that everybody will raise it at every opportunity. We need a resolution, and we need it now.

Mr McGuigan: Does the deputy First Minister agree that the international bureaux provide a key function in representing the priorities of the Executive overseas?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Absolutely. They are important not only to spread better understanding about Northern Ireland but to grow our economy, which is a joint objective of the First Minister and I with our prosperity agenda, and to try to ensure that the economy of Northern Ireland works for everyone. We know that an essential element of that is foreign direct investment and support. We can attract that only by utilising those bureaux and ensuring that Northern Ireland's voice is heard on the global stage. All the fantastic things that Northern Ireland has to offer, and the message that Northern Ireland is open for business and that we here to discuss that, must be clearly put out there to the international community.

Mr Irwin: Have the Executive discussed the serious issue of veterinary medicines, and, as far as she is aware, has the AERA Minister made any efforts to resolve it?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. Yes, of course, we have discussed that with ministerial colleagues in the Executive. As I indicated, I emphasise at every opportunity the seriousness of the issue.

The Member will know from his farming background and his role in the agriculture policy brief how important the issue is to the entire farming community, as it is to vets, not just those who work in the agriculture sector but those who work with domestic pets. He will be fully aware of how urgent getting a resolution to the issue is. We call on the United Kingdom Government to work closely with us in urging the European Union to find a resolution. If it does not find one, we call on the UK Government to operate the mechanisms under the Command Paper and take the unilateral action to which they have committed to ensure that Northern Ireland is not left behind when the transition period ends, as set out in the Windsor framework.

2.15 pm

Mr Allister: The Minister and her party chose to go back into government without the resolution of the veterinary medicines issue on the premise of some promise in the 'Safeguarding the Union' document, but, today, in the High Court, we have had an even greater implosion of a promise in that document. That promise was that the Irish Sea border applied only to

trade, but, today, the Rwanda Act has been struck down because of the supremacy of EU law. Does she agree with Lord Dodds, who said:

"this confirms the detrimental anti Union constitutional ramifications of the Windsor Framework"

and, if so, why is she still supporting the Windsor framework?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I will speak in a personal capacity. The Member will be aware that 'Safeguarding the Union' addressed many issues and focused on trade primarily. He will also be aware, as it is on the record, that — speaking personally — my colleagues raised concerns time and time again in the House of Lords and the House of Commons about the scope of article 2 of the Windsor framework and the "No diminution of rights" issue. The UK Government and their lawyers took a different view and maintained it robustly. The High Court has been very clear today. The matter may well go to the Supreme Court, but, in my view, the UK Government must take cognisance of what the High Court has said and move to urgently address the issues, because the UK Parliament has sovereignty over those issues. It has asserted that sovereignty, so it should use it to address the issues emerging from the "No diminution of rights" approach, the wider scope and the implications set out in the judgement today.

Communities in Transition

5. **Ms Ferguson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the contribution of the Communities in Transition (CIT) project in tackling paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime. (AQO 399/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Communities in Transition is designed to build safer, empowered communities free from criminality and the coercive control of paramilitarism. To date, 82 projects worth over £19 million have been delivered across the eight designated areas. Fifty-two of those projects have been completed, with the remaining 30 contracts continuing into this year. CIT has improved community resilience through targeted interventions to address issues such as child and financial exploitation; the impact of drugs, including addiction and poor mental health; community safety and policing; and the negative impact of paramilitarism on the physical landscape. Paramilitarism remains a residual problem in some parts of our society.

Focusing on a policing and criminal justice system solution is important, but we also know that it is not enough and that we need a wider holistic approach that includes working with communities.

Ms Ferguson: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. Does she agree that the Communities in Transition programme has made a difference to tackling paramilitarism and that the work should be expanded?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. Yes, the feedback and the evaluation have been very positive, particularly around the resilience in communities. We know that it is incredibly important that communities have that resilience. I highlight the point that, during the COVID crisis, we really saw that resilience come to the fore in our incredible third sector — the community sector. It was able to operate quickly to help and support so many who live in those communities. We should be proud of our third sector, and I am glad that the project has contributed in such a positive way to increasing resilience even further.

Mr McNulty: How can the deputy First Minister reconcile tackling paramilitarism with the reality that half of the Executive Office, including her party, continue to cheerlead paramilitarism right up to the current day?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. I have always been very clear that every Member across the House and in the Executive should be clear that paramilitarism is wrong. It was always wrong, and there was always an alternative. I have said that clearly. Of course, signing up to policing, justice and the rule of law was an important change that was brought about by the St Andrews Agreement, but we all must go further and ensure every day that we do not glorify terrorism but call it out and take the rightful path of law, justice and order.

Ms Sugden: Deputy First Minister, how successful have we been in tackling paramilitarism when we hear nearly weekly of incidents such as the incident at Bushmills last week and other incidents of criminality across Northern Ireland? How successful can we be in the absence of a Programme for Government that has not been fully realised since 2016?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. As the Member is aware, the Departments and the Executive operate in a number of ways. It is not just about the

Programme for Government commitments but about strategies within the Departments that the Executive and the House endorse. Those strategies often go well beyond the lifetime of a particular Executive or Programme for Government. That is deeply important.

We have come a very long way in tackling paramilitarism, but we need to acknowledge the complexity of the issue. Often, what we call "paramilitarism" is simply criminality. The Member will be aware of that from her work generally but specifically in relation to the Justice brief. Where there is that criminality, there has to be a robust criminal justice approach: let there be absolutely no doubt about that. We will support communities to have resilience, but criminality is wrong and was always wrong. It needs to be called out, and it needs that robust reproach.

Mr Durkan: With £19 million having been awarded through Communities in Transition, it is important that the public is guaranteed value for money. How exactly are projects measured for effectiveness? Can the deputy First Minister point to an example of best practice?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. For any of these projects, in any Department, there is, rightly, an obligation to have an evaluation process. That will measure the outcomes. It will look at the outcomes set at the beginning of the project, at the indicators and at what was baselined for what the project was designed to improve on. Of course, we then curve back round, sometimes periodically throughout a project and sometimes at the end of a project, to assess how effective it has been. We have not always been great at taking the programmes that have been evaluated as being most effective and ensuring that they are mainstreamed and moved forward. We need to get better at that.

I attended a great event just here in the Great Hall for one of the CIT projects relating to restorative justice. We heard from members of the police, teachers and community people who were using the restorative justice practices funded and supported through the programme. We heard about how the project de-escalates situations in classrooms and schools in the community, avoiding the situation getting to the point where it is much more serious, including in its consequences for the pupils involved. That is a fantastic project. I always emphasise that we could not do this without our fantastic community partners on the front line who roll the projects out and deliver them.

Mr Donnelly: Given the inability of authorities to deal adequately with the display of symbols promoting proscribed organisations in breach of the Terrorism Act 2000, is there any recognition that there remains a fundamental failure to remove the scourge of paramilitary gangs from too many of our communities?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. Paramilitarism has absolutely no role in the Northern Ireland of today. It had absolutely no role in our past, and it has no role in our future. As indicated, paramilitarism and, frankly, the criminality that is involved in current activities need a robust criminal justice response.

Strategic Framework to End Violence Against and Girls

6. **Miss McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what engagement they or their officials have had with stakeholders in relation to the strategic framework to ending violence against women and girls. (AQO 400/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Mr Speaker, with your permission, junior Minister Cameron will answer the question.

Mrs Cameron (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): The draft strategic framework was developed following a successful co-design process involving over 50 stakeholders, with representatives from Departments, statutory agencies, a range of sectors including the voluntary and community sector and those with lived experience. A public consultation took place last summer, during which officials held a series of public sessions and targeted engagements to seek input from groups facing additional barriers, including the LGBTQ+ community, migrant women, deaf and disabled, and rural women. To ensure that the voices of young people were reflected, youth panels were also held in collaboration with the Education Authority (EA).

In February, the First Minister and deputy First Minister met the co-design group, and junior Minister Reilly and I visited a number of women's centres and organisations to engage directly with stakeholders. We will continue to engage with our co-design partners and stakeholders to ensure that their lived experience and expertise is reflected in the design and delivery of the framework.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the junior Minister for her response. As she is aware, tackling violence against women and girls will involve societal change from early on. Can she give some more detail on how young people have been involved in the framework's development?

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. The involvement of young people was raised with us during the engagements with stakeholders. Violence against women and girls in all its forms affects every one of us. In order to tackle the challenge, there is an urgent need to focus on children and young people. A series of youth panels was established in partnership with the Education Authority, and their input informed the development of the draft strategy. In September, our officials facilitated a youth engagement event at Parliament Buildings with young people from the end violence against women and girls (EVAWG) strategy youth panels, at which they participated in a range of creative and innovative activities. Young people's input is key to the framework's successful implementation.

Ms Sheerin: Can the junior Minister advise how the recently developed framework to end violence against women and girls will help deal with the immediate pressures and challenges?

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for her question. Work is already under way to establish the foundations necessary for the whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach that is needed to tackle the problem. Partnership working is key, and we are working together on prevention across education, in the workplace, when socialising and with our children and young people. That work includes developing campaigns to influence and change attitudes and behaviours for the whole of society, supporting partners to develop training packages to equip people to do the right thing and ensuring that there are good policies and tools in place to protect women and girls, wherever they are. Violence against women and girls is everyone's problem, and solving it will need collective action by everyone in society.

Ms Bradshaw: Going back to the issue of engagement, can the junior Minister outline whether sex workers and trans women — both vulnerable and marginalised sections of society — were engaged with?

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for her question. I do not have that information available, so I will respond to her in writing.

Ms Hunter: We are the only part of the UK where women's aid groups do not receive guaranteed state funding. Does the junior Minister believe that that is acceptable, given the incredible work that they do to support vulnerable women and girls in our society?

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for her important question. Women's Aid NI, Nexus and other organisations lost that funding. We are operating in a difficult budgetary situation and are aware that the impact is being felt not just across Departments but in communities and across the community and voluntary sector. Core grant funding remains the responsibility of the Department of Health, but we will continue to engage with the Minister of Health on the issue in the context of the recently agreed Budget position.

Maze/Long Kesh: Potential

7. **Mr McAleer** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their plans to maximise the potential of the Maze/Long Kesh site. (AQO 401/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: We recognise the immense economic, historical and reconciliation potential of the site and look forward to working with the recently appointed board to maximise that potential. We are hoping to meet the board in the next number of weeks. The Member will be aware that the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS) continues to develop the area. Of course, it is the fantastic Balmoral show this week, so I hope that everybody intends to come down and support it. It is not just an absolute jewel in the heart of my constituency, Lagan Valley, but a fantastic showcase for the entirety of Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: Briefly, Mr McAleer.

Mr McAleer: I agree with the deputy First Minister's reference to the fantastic Balmoral show. I was there this morning, and they are getting well prepared for it. Does she agree that we now need to see a plan to maximise the site's economic, historical and reconciliation benefits?

Mr Speaker: Briefly, Minister.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. I absolutely want to see the site's potential unlocked.

We have always been clear that, whatever the way forward is, it has to be sensitive to the

victims and survivors and those who are most impacted on by the issues. There is huge economic potential, and as long as it is done in that context, we will have discussions to try to find an agreed way forward. I hope that we can.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: We now move to topical questions.

Irish Language Commissioner: Appointment

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when an Irish Language Commissioner will be appointed, given that the theme of the Opposition day is delivery. (AQT 261/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. The First Minister and I have received the submission on the appointments process, and we hope to make an announcement on it very shortly.

Mr O'Toole: I welcome the deputy First Minister's clarity. She said, "Very shortly". She will appreciate that I asked the question of the Executive Office in February and received the answer a couple of weeks ago that we would be kept informed of the process. I ask that it is expedited and that there is clarity before the summer recess on how the Identity and Language Act 2022 will be delivered. The appointment of a commissioner was the reason for a spurious and unacceptable fight for many years, so it would be helpful to have clarity before the summer.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware that it is not just one commissioner but two commissioners and a body. The Commissioner for the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition, the Irish Language Commissioner and the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression will move forward together, and we intend to go about the appointments process for all three: the two commissioner posts and the new body. It is our intention to make the announcement very shortly.

Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme

T2. **Mr Tennyson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the

Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQT 262/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. I am pleased to say that the disablement payment scheme has given out over £40 million of settlements and awards to those who applied to the board. There is still significant frustration with the time that it has taken. As previously indicated to the House, the process is that people put in their application, and the reaching out for further information takes place after that. That has added to the time taken, because of the complexity of a number of the cases and because the incidents involved in some of them took place a considerable time ago. I understand the frustration entirely, but it is positive that we have got over £40 million out to those who need it most.

Mr Tennyson: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. She will be aware of calls from victim support organisations for an extension to the deadline for applications for backdated payments. Does she support that call? What representations has she made to the UK Government to that effect?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. Yes, I absolutely support that call, and we have made representations to the UK Government. We had a draft letter; I will just check and confirm to the Member that it was issued. The First Minister and I are certainly in agreement on that, and we intend to write formally, but we have raised the matter directly with the Secretary of State and the UK Government through other channels as well.

Public Service Delivery

T3. **Mr Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister agrees that it is Tory austerity and sustained underinvestment over the past decade or more that has limited the ability of the Executive to deliver quality public services. (AQT 263/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: There will always be a challenge to fund our public services adequately. The current Budget settlement has been very challenging. The Finance Department's assessment is that, over the past couple of years, we fell below what was deemed to be "assessed need". That assessed need is 124% of the per-head spend in England. Many here would dispute that figure, and we argue that it is higher. Some of the costs are logical: there are economies of scale,

but there is also increased spend on policing because of the ongoing security situation. Infrastructure such as our water and sewerage costs a lot of money because it needs investment to make it more efficient. We have always made the point, however, that transforming our public services also requires an investment of funds to ensure that the efficiencies can come through. We cannot do that in the current fiscal envelope that we have been given. That is why we have made representations. We are not just holding out a begging bowl — that is not what we are about — but asking the UK Government to support us to do the necessary transformation to put Northern Ireland's finances on a sustainable footing.

Mr Kelly: I thank the Minister for her answer. As a member of the Policing Board, I will also mention funding for the Justice Department and the number of police officers that we need. Further to what she said, does the deputy First Minister agree that a new funding model is needed, based on what is essential to deliver the public services that people deserve and need?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. Many people ask why we have such demands on public-sector funding, but the reality is, as we know, that it is not just because our public services are structured in a way that costs more and that that requires a fundamental transformation but because we have additional needs. We have high levels of chronic illness in the 50-plus age group and that requires medical support and intervention; we have higher levels of special educational needs and mental health challenges that need to be addressed. We are all very aware of the high level of economic inactivity, and we need to support those people to get back into the workforce. There are additional pressures on our Budget that make funding our public services challenging, and that is why we need the additional support. Ultimately, we want to get to a sustainable public finance situation.

Voluntary and Community Sector

T4. **Ms Forsythe** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline how the draft Programme for Government will capture and acknowledge the value of the voluntary and community sector, given that they will be aware of her work with that sector, especially last year when it faced a cliff edge with no united and challenging voice, albeit she was pleased to establish a new all-party group for the sector for which a primary concern is whether the

Government truly recognise its value. (AQT 264/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. To me, the answer is not necessarily confined to the Programme for Government. At every stage and level in all our Departments, we need to recognise the important role of our community and voluntary sector. Increasingly, over the years, our community and voluntary sector has rolled out core public services, and we need to recognise how important that is and the essential role that it plays. Very often, when budgets are tight, it is the first sector to be hit hard with the reductions, and the incredible value of the work is not recognised. That needs to change, and the sector needs to be protected. As I said earlier, the third sector does a fantastic job; in my view, the community sector in Northern Ireland is the best in the world. When people come here and see the sector, they are amazed by how incredible it is, what it is able to deliver and the connections that it has in the communities that it serves.

Ms Forsythe: The UK's Shared Prosperity Fund is due to end in March 2025, and a huge number of organisations in the sector are due to place staff on protective notice from December 2024, if no clarity is sought for them. Will the deputy First Minister outline any steps already taken or planned by the Executive Office to secure the funding going forward?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. We have already made representations on the issue. We need the highest level of certainty that we can get. We do not want to get to the stage where we are looking over the cliff edge again without certainty on quantum or what the projects or schemes will look like. The relevant Northern Ireland Departments and the sector should be part of the process of developing phase 2 of the Shared Prosperity Fund to ensure that it is fit for purpose here. We also have the British-Irish Council in June, which provides an opportunity, at the highest possible level, to make those representations to ensure that the support is there in the next phase of the Shared Prosperity Fund or whatever replaces it.

North West 200

T5. **Mr Robinson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the deputy First Minister's assessment of the North West 200 and to state whether she agrees that it really is a world-class event that brings huge benefits to our shores. (AQT 265/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. I absolutely and wholeheartedly agree. I was there on Saturday, and it was a fantastic day and a fantastic event. I saw many volunteers working with those in the North West 200 to make it, as the Member said, not just a Northern Ireland event but a world-class event. It was absolutely fantastic. Thousands of families and spectators enjoyed the event, which had world-class competitors. It is a jewel in the crown of Northern Ireland, and we should be proud of it. I will push the case for additional support and the right support for the North West 200, road racing and other types of events that are positive for Northern Ireland.

Mr Robinson: I very much value the deputy First Minister's comments. I am pleased that she and her Department, in conjunction with the sports Minister, have committed to promoting that event. Will maximum opportunity also be given to another major sporting event next year — the Open at Royal Portrush?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. Absolutely. For too long, there has been a frustration among the organisers of golfing, road racing and other sporting events because of the need to try to secure the right funding and support from the right sources. We in the Executive need to crack that. Such events shine a global spotlight on Northern Ireland and on some of the most beautiful places that we have, such as the north coast and many others. We should be rightly proud of them, and we should all promote them. Of course, we need to offer not just funding but support in other ways through our Departments. I know that our Communities Minister will be at the forefront of championing not just golf but road racing at the North West 200 and our other great sporting events.

T:BUC: Community Relations and Sport

T6. **Mr Honeyford** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on how Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) is using sport to help to develop positive community relations throughout Northern Ireland. (AQT 266/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. Of course, sport was one of the signature projects of the first T:BUC. We are undergoing a review of that. I have no doubt that sport will feature heavily as we move into the revised strategy. I have had the great privilege, as, I know, he and many Members around the Chamber have, to go out and see

some of the sporting activities that bring people together. It is absolutely right and proper that we enjoy not only the sports, identity and cultural expressions pertaining to ourselves but those that other people here in Northern Ireland experience, enjoy and love. That is a core piece of the work, and I have no doubt that it will move forward.

Mr Honeyford: I thank the deputy First Minister for her response. I welcome the fact that she visited St Paul's and tried camogie. It sent such a positive media message about breaking down divisions.

St Patrick's Gaelic Athletic Club in Lisburn does incredible work in bringing the community together. Unfortunately, until now, she has not supported or signed its support documentation to enable it to purchase its pitches from the MOD. Can the deputy First Minister now reassure the club of her support?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware that, because that is a constituency issue, I have been working with and speaking to the club, as have my constituency colleagues. It is an MOD site, so the matter is, of course, outwith devolved powers. Of course, I am happy to continue to have those conversations with the club.

Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee

T7. **Mr Brooks** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the consideration that the Executive are giving to ensuring that all Departments are properly prepared and resourced to provide the necessary advice to the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee to allow it to undertake its role. (AQT 267/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question and his interest in the matter. That is a new area of policy for the Departments, and he will be acutely aware of that. I have spoken to officials in the Executive Office who have a coordination role in that in order to ensure that the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee is supported. I know that that new area will require some evolution. It is about ensuring that the right skills and expertise are there in order to support the Committee in that work. The Committee's role in understanding how the rules and regulations will impact on Northern Ireland is incredibly important. I have no doubt that those conversations will continue, and I am happy to have them.

Mr Brooks: The deputy First Minister may be aware that, in the past week or two, the Committee has experienced some pushback from Departments on issues that are technically reserved matters but for which the expertise in this place and in Northern Ireland sits with Departments. I am sure that she will agree with me that it is in the interests of the Executive as a whole to work with us in order to ensure that we monitor and address any risk to Northern Ireland and its interests.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for that. Absolutely. The mechanism was put in place in order to ensure that new rules, regulations and laws impacting on the people of Northern Ireland would not automatically apply here without some type of scrutiny of or say in them. That is a core democratic principle. Therefore, it is absolutely right and proper that all Departments should do their best to support the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee in its work, because it is in the interests of all people in Northern Ireland to make sure that the rules, regulations and laws that impact on us are properly scrutinised and that the right advice is given.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: That brings to a conclusion the time for questions to the deputy First Minister.

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Family Farming: Sustainability

1. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, further to the article 'Farming — On Life Support', published on 1 May 2024, to outline what action he is taking to ensure the future sustainability of family farming. (AQO 410/22-27)

Mr Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): At the beginning of this Question Time, I pay tribute to Jennifer Fulton following her sad passing on Sunday 5 May. Jennifer had a long and successful career, including as chief executive of Ulster Wildlife. She was an exceptional person and will be forever missed. My thoughts and prayers go to Norman, Sarah, Peter and James and her wider family, friends and colleagues. I think I speak for everyone in the House in saying that she leaves a powerful legacy. Our thoughts are with everyone affected by her sad passing.

I thank Mr Beattie for his question. I recognise the challenges that the agricultural sector faces, particularly in dealing with volatility in prices, incomes and the present weather conditions. However, I do not agree with the premise of the report that the farming sector is on the verge of collapse. Whilst I accept that there are undoubtedly challenges — I am aware of them — I believe that the outlook for agriculture is positive and that young people and new entrants will continue to be attracted to it. The proposal for guaranteed farm-gate prices, put forward in the article referenced in the question, is not feasible and would not be contemplated for other sectors of a market economy. It would make our exports uncompetitive, which, for a sector dependent upon exports, would be disastrous. Furthermore, to prevent our domestic production being replaced by imports, economic controls on food imports from GB, the EU and the rest of the world would be required. That would be very controversial, if not without the remit of the Assembly.

My Department provides extensive support to the farming sector. Direct income support payments to farmers are around £300 million per year. In addition, the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) provides farmers with support through business development groups; training in family farming key skills; regular press articles and management notes; and a number of open events, including slurry management events in early February 2024. I was glad to attend one such event because it is good to hear the different views in relation to this. We must have a discussion as to how we can best support our farming community.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for his answer, which was twofold. In the first part, he disregarded the report, which was disappointing. It is clear that farmers are under severe pressure and family farming needs support. The Minister has outlined that he is not willing to legislate to require wholesalers, retailers and processors to pay at least the costs of production plus inflation-linked margins beyond that. How else will he protect or support farmers in the coming months and years?

Mr Muir: I will make an oral statement in the Chamber tomorrow on the future of the farm support programme in Northern Ireland. That work has been going on for the past number of years. This is a big week for the farming community with the Balmoral show, and it is important that we do what we can to support that community. The figures on the levels of exports in Northern Ireland are clear. I do not want to make the farming community

uncompetitive. My worry is that that legislation would do that and inflict unintended consequences upon it.

Mr McAleer: I want to be associated with the Minister's comments on the passing of Jennifer Fulton and the sympathies that he extended to Norman and the family.

A recent survey from Rural Support in Cookstown indicated that there has been an increase in referrals to that charity as a consequence of financial distress. Can the Minister give any assurance to the farming community about future agricultural funding?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. There are two parts to it, and I will take the second part first. I cannot give guarantees about future funding, because it is predicated upon the next Government and what funding they may provide. However, I assure Members and people more widely that I am making strong representations, to both the current and potential next Government, about the funding that needs to be provided in Northern Ireland. I will be doing that this week.

I am very conscious of farmers' mental health. My term as Minister is coming up to 100 days. I have engaged with lots of different people from the farming community and rural areas. I see mental health and how we can support people as a significant issue. I will want to pick that up in our future rural development policy.

Mr Buckley: Sadly, the Minister's attitude towards farmers to date has not filled our farming community with confidence about the future sustainability of family farming. TB continues to have a devastating impact on local farms, with some 89,000 beef and dairy cows having been culled in the past five years. What urgent interventions will the Minister make to grapple with that issue? Will he assure already distressed local farmers that he will not cut the much-needed compensation?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. He clearly has his Facebook clip already prepared.

Mr Buckley: Well, answer the question.

Mr Muir: I will answer your question.

Mr Buckley: Good. Farmers want to hear —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister will be heard.

Mr Muir: I am working and engaging with the farming community. I have been doing that quite consistently. I am very committed to that as part of my role.

TB is a significant issue for the farming community and my Department. I bid for funding so that my Department would be able to continue the compensation rate of 100%, but I received no funding whatsoever for that. I am engaging with officials to see what we can do about the compensation rate. I am also engaging with my new Chief Veterinary Officer on the interventions that we can make. I recognise that that is a significant issue for the farming community, and I am determined to act. What is more, I am prepared to listen, which we do not do very much of in this place.

Mr Blair: Returning to the support and income sustainability theme of the original question, I point out to the Minister that there has been considerable discussion about the subject of minimum farm-gate prices. What consideration has he given to those and to whether they would be effective?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. The majority of Northern Ireland's farm produce is sold outside of Northern Ireland. Artificially increasing farm-gate prices would be to the detriment of the competitiveness of agriculture exports to Great Britain, Ireland and the rest of the world. In the domestic market, higher farm-gate prices for Northern Ireland farm produce would encourage retailers and food processors to increase their imports of cheaper produce from overseas. If proposals to put controls on imports were included in the farm welfare Bill, DAERA could not enforce them, and they would cause real issues with supply chains. In addition, if farm-gate prices were guaranteed to cover the cost of production plus a margin, farm suppliers could increase the cost of their goods, knowing that government would have to adjust farm-gate prices accordingly.

Furthermore, the regulation of anti-competitive practice and agreements and the abuse of a dominant position in the market are reserved matters. As such, the Northern Ireland Assembly and DAERA have no remit to introduce minimum price legislation on farm-gate prices.

Mr O'Toole: Another element of the 'Farming — On Life Support' report was the reflection that the Going for Growth strategy was environmentally hugely destructive and that it worked against small family farms to the advantage of large corporations. Will he confirm

that no official in his Department is working to deliver outcomes in the Going for Growth strategy and that that is not operative policy?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. I am very aware of the policy. I have been looking at the impact that it has on my Department. In the weeks and months ahead, I will make statements about the future direction of the policy. Let me be clear: I would not have signed off on Going for Growth.

Avian Flu

2. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the risk of avian flu. (AQO 411/22-27)

Mr Muir: Following the coming into force of the Windsor Framework (Implementation) Regulations 2024, the implementation of the requirements of animal health law in Northern Ireland, including those relating to disease prevention, no longer sits within my ministerial responsibilities. It now comes under the direction and control of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. A significant list of areas is included, such as foot-and-mouth disease, African swine fever, avian influenza, rabies, bluetongue, bovine TB, bovine viral diarrhoea and many more. I am happy to lay that list in the Library for the Member.

I am aware of the Member's concerns about this. I believe that I should have direction and control over those areas. I have been engaging with the UK Government around this. The Minister of State, Steve Baker, has informed me that his desire is that those regulations will cover only internal market and trade issues. I made it clear that we need a resolution so that I can fully answer your questions about that and the other areas that I cited.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for his answer and the update. I will point individuals to it. Minister, many thousands of people, including me, across the country have recreational flocks. They are very proud of them and very worried about the impact that avian flu will have. Are you able to give even some direction to those small amateur and part-time flock keepers on how they can protect their flock and the greater wildlife in the area?

Mr Muir: As I outlined, I do not have direction and control over that area. I have outlined my views on the need to rectify that. We have full information in relation to this on our website,

and the latest update on 7 February 2024 states:

"Avian influenza is a highly contagious disease, caused by an influenza type A virus, which affects a wide range of birds. Primary introduction of the virus is normally considered to be through wild bird contact while secondary outbreaks are normally associated with fomite spread of infected material. With highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), clinical signs of the infection are normally expressed through the observation of high mortalities although other signs may also be observed.

In January 2024, it is considered that the likelihood of a notifiable avian influenza incursion into poultry during the winter is MEDIUM as winter migrants are continuing to arrive from areas with known HPAI cases and environmental conditions are favourable for virus survival.

The level of uncertainty is considered HIGH due to uncertainty around the timing of migration, the unknown immune status of resident wild birds and increasing frequency of drift in the N1.

The impact of an incursion of notifiable HPAI to the poultry industry would be MODERATE.

Overall, the risk of notifiable HPAI incursion into the NI poultry flock is MODERATE with HIGH uncertainty with biosecurity playing a key role in the risk posed to each individual flock."

I am not satisfied with the content of the answer that I am giving, but that is because it does not fall under my direction and control.

Mr Allister: Although some of the Minister's powers on the important issue of veterinary medicines have been gazumped under the DUP deal to return to the Assembly by the implementation regulations, he is the Minister of Agriculture. Surely, with that hat, he is making representations on the whole issue of veterinary medicine. What has he done on that issue since he came to office?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. I am the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. On the issue of veterinary medicines, I have been making representations to the UK Government. I asked to join the veterinary medicines working group because I want to be proactive in finding solutions to this.

It is primarily a matter for the UK Government to negotiate with the EU, but I have been making representations and have been very clear that there needs to be a veterinary agreement on this.

Agricultural Shows

3. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he intends to visit agricultural shows in Ballymoney and Ballymena. (AQO 412/22-27)

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. I am keen to immerse myself in the local agricultural show season as much as my diary allows, and I have plans to attend at least six local shows across Northern Ireland over the coming months. Unfortunately, I am unable to attend the Ballymoney show this year as I have already accepted a kind invitation to the Lurgan show, which also occurs on Saturday 1 June. I intend to attend the Ballymena show on Saturday 15 June and am looking forward to what will be a very enjoyable day.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can I remind the Minister that there is also Friday night for the Ballymoney show? He would be made very welcome on the Friday night, which is a social gathering as much as anything. The Minister will be aware of the shop window that these shows are in promoting biodiversity and sustainability as well as assisting in health and well-being. Will the Minister give a commitment to the House that he can reinstate the funding enjoyed by the previous Minister, Edwin Poots?

Mr Muir: My diary is challenging on the evening of Friday 31 May, but if that is an invite, I will take it up and I will see you there, OK?

With regard to the funding, you know the budgetary situation for my Department. I am working with officials because I am also trying to meet the compensation rate, for example, for TB. I have difficult decisions to make. There are other funding streams that I would encourage the show organisers to apply for as well.

Ms Mulholland: I would be delighted to welcome the Minister to our constituency on the Friday night. I believe Hugo Duncan does a great wee set. Minister, will you outline what other funding avenues may be available to show organisers?

Mr Muir: Thank you very much. There are significant other funding opportunities available

to shows, in particular, the Northern Ireland Regional Food Programme. It is possible for local show organisations to avail themselves of financial assistance via that avenue, as part of the programme provides funding to support food and drink promotions at regional fairs and exhibitions.

Mr McNulty: Minister, will you be going to the Newry show or the Armagh show? When you attend, will you express some empathy with the agriculture sector, which feels disproportionately targeted by the climate change targets, especially when it witnesses, on a daily basis, the climate burden that global multinational companies such as Amazon place on society, albeit they seem to get off scot-free while all the pressure is heaped onto farmers?

3.00 pm

Mr Muir: The Member has walked a bit of a distance from the SDLP with that question. I have empathy all the time, because I view the people with whom I engage as friends and colleagues. I intend to attend shows in Lurgan, Armagh, Saintfield, Ballymena, Omagh, Castlewellan and, hopefully, the Clogher valley, as well as the big show this week: the Balmoral show.

Environmental Complaints

4. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is resourced to address environmental complaints, within its remit, on behalf of residents. (AQO 413/22-27)

Mr Muir: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency receives a wide range of complaints, in keeping with its hugely varied remit. Those complaints can relate to water pollution, protected habitats and impacts from industry and criminal activities, to name but a few. The Member will be aware of the budgetary pressures that have an impact on any regulator responding to complaints from residents. However, the agency will continue to prioritise its response to complaints from residents and works closely with other stakeholders, such as local councils, to resolve residents' concerns.

I welcome the Member's engagement with my officials in resolving concerns from residents in his constituency relating to two regulated facilities. My officials continue to work with all stakeholders to play our part in helping resolve the residents' concerns.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for his answer. Thank you for your reference to the residents in the Killeeshil, Cabragh and Granville area. They are suffering significant ongoing odours emanating from two factories, and the agencies are telling them that they struggle to react quickly enough. In order to protect residents' interests and ensure that people can breathe the clean air, is it now time to consider establishing a fully independent and fully resourced environmental protection agency?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question, which is about something that I will respond to in the debate after Question Time. There is a need for independent oversight of those issues, and I am aware of the concerns. I encourage the Member to continue to engage with me and my officials on residents' specific concerns, and we will work on those issues in the short term.

Ms Nicholl: Will the Minister provide a progress update on the environmental improvement plan (EIP)? Have there been any complaints about the failure to adopt the plan?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her question. There was a statutory duty to publish the environmental improvement plan, which would act as Northern Ireland's first environment strategy, by 25 July last year. Thus far, the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) has received two complaints about the failure to publish. I am keen that we adopt and publish the plan. I have been engaging with Executive colleagues since March of this year about receiving approval. The plan is relevant to the environment in Northern Ireland and to Lough Neagh in particular, in the context of its catchment area. I will ensure that the plan is shared on my departmental website in the time ahead so that people are conscious of it. There are many aspects to the environmental improvement plan, such as the nutrient action programme and the river basin management plan, that are absolutely key to addressing the issues with Lough Neagh.

Mr Durkan: Is the Minister aware of any examples of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency declining or being unable to respond to environmental complaints from constituents owing to a lack of resources?

Mr Muir: The role of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency sits alongside that of councils, particularly when it comes to fly-tipping, so signposting needs to occur. If individuals have raised issues and not got a response from the relevant authority, I ask that

the Member bring that to my attention so that we can follow it up.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 was withdrawn after the deadline, so we move to question 6.

Bovine TB: Compensation Rate

6. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the consultation on reducing the compensation rate under the bovine tuberculosis programme. (AQO 415/22-27)

Mr Muir: Following the coming into force of the Windsor Framework (Implementation) Regulations 2024, implementation of the requirements of animal health law in Northern Ireland, including those relating to bovine TB, no longer sits within my ministerial responsibilities and now comes under the direction and control of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

I was working on the matter until the point at which the regulations came into being. I want to take forward actions on TB — that is why I think that it is unfair to criticise me on this, as I want to do something about it — but it does not sit within my area of responsibility. I was engaging with officials on interventions until the regulations came into force, and I am looking at what we can take forward on the compensation rate for Northern Ireland.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for his answer. Just to be clear, there was no criticism in my question, but I thank him for the update. The Minister will be aware that the bovine TB rate is almost double that in the South of Ireland, which is obviously an issue for many of our constituents. He mentioned that he hopes to do some work, so will he give us a wee update on what that package of measures might be and how he expects to see it being brought forward?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. No criticism was intended; apologies.

I am conscious that the rate of infection is approximately 10% here in Northern Ireland, whereas it is 5% down South. I am particularly aware of the issues, for example, in Fermanagh. A number of interventions can be taken around this. I am aware that a wildlife strategy is part of this, and I want to make announcements about that in the time ahead, providing the UK Government sort out this mess.

Mr Elliott: I put on record my sympathies to the Fulton family on the death of Mrs Fulton.

I will follow up on the question about TB. Will the Minister confirm that he has no responsibility for policy issues or legislation around animal health, including TB, but continues to pay for the issues around TB and animal health? That sounds like a hugely depressing situation. What is the Minister doing to get responsibility back?

Mr Muir: I have been making representations to the UK Government and Minister Steve Baker. I sent a letter to Minister Steve Baker, and officials are in communication with the UK Government. There is a list of diseases that are covered as part of this. It is a long list, so I will place it in the Library so that people are aware of it. The situation will not be tenable for much longer and needs to be rectified.

Mr Speaker: Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Deposit Return Scheme

8. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the delivery of a deposit return scheme (DRS). (AQO 417/22-27)

Mr Muir: On 25 April, I published a joint policy statement alongside Ministers in other UK nations. That provided an update on the positions that we have reached to aid interoperability and the smooth running of the DRS throughout the UK. The update was very much informed by input from stakeholders, which was undertaken in the past year, and learning from other operational schemes. The DRS implementation date is now October 2027 rather than 2025. I would have preferred that the delay had been avoided, particularly as the DRS in Ireland went live in February this year, but I fully understand the complexities of trying to put in place a scheme of this scale and make it interoperable throughout the UK nations and with the South. Regulations to bring in the DRS are now being finalised, following highly focused and collaborative engagement with industry over the past 12 months. The regulations are currently going through EU and World Trade Organization notification and are timetabled to be laid in Westminster this autumn.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister. Given that there is a bit of extra time, will some engagement take place with counterpart Ministers in the South to ensure that the schemes are equal, so that we can avoid a lot

of the confusion from having a different scheme on either side of the border?

Mr Muir: I am keen to ensure that there is that interoperability, and my officials are in regular contact with counterparts in Ireland, along with their scheme administrator, to learn lessons from their experience in setting up their scheme, which was launched in February. Stakeholders and business representatives from across the island of Ireland have been actively involved in our DRS regulations to identify any avoidable consequences of having two schemes. The schemes will align on the material type and size within scope, but it is important to recognise that they are two separate schemes in different jurisdictions and that measures such as separate labelling will be required to prevent fraud between the two schemes. I am keen to make sure that they are interoperable, and I have a desire to go and see the scheme in operation down South.

Mr Speaker: Mr Tom Buchanan is not in his place.

Household Waste

10. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline his plans to reduce the amount of household waste going to landfill. (AQO 419/22-27)

Mr Muir: We are making good progress today.

Despite having policy and legislation in place to divert resources up the waste hierarchy, too much of our waste ends up in landfill. From households, it is around 23% of waste, and, from businesses, it is even higher. I want to reduce waste generation through effective waste prevention, promoting reuse, repair and redistribution. We must reduce our reliance on landfill as far as possible, not only because it is the right thing to do for our environment but also to help achieve our challenging targets, particularly that less than 10% of waste is sent to landfill by 2035.

One of the biggest issues is with biodegradable material entering landfill. That material enters landfill and emits methane for decades. To counteract that, my officials are exploring options to divert as much of that material as possible away from landfill sites to treatment methods further up the waste hierarchy.

On 7 March, I launched a consultation on proposals to improve recycling and divert more waste from landfill. For households, those proposals, if implemented, would see residual

waste capacity reduced by 25% at the kerbside, with a move to three-weekly collections or smaller receptacles. Details of the consultation are available on the DAERA website. I encourage everyone to respond.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. Given the challenges associated with landfill, I believe that we create a bigger problem for future generations by dumping stuff in landfills. We have landfill sites all over Northern Ireland. Does the Minister agree that there has to be a better way of disposing of waste?

Mr Muir: I totally agree. I have a consultation under way in relation to recycling, and I will consult on a waste strategy. There is a lot that we need to do around this. Landfill results in a cost to councils and ratepayers. That is why we want to move to a much more sustainable way forward. I have confidence that we will do that, because the people of Northern Ireland have made great progress in reducing waste and increasing recycling. I am confident about the future.

Ms Bradshaw: Will the Minister outline his plans to increase the recycling of waste from business organisations?

Mr Muir: There is a lot that can be done by businesses. The transposition of the circular economy package into domestic legislation amended the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and introduced a range of targets, including a 65% municipal recycling rate by 2035. That legislation also extended the definition of "municipal waste" to include waste collected from sources other than households where the waste is similar in nature and composition. That means that around 57,000 businesses, public-sector and third-sector organisations are now within the scope of the revised definition.

Stakeholder engagement has been ongoing around that for some time. The current consultation, 'Rethinking Our Resources: Measures for Climate Action and a Circular Economy in NI' includes several proposals for the non-household municipal sector. I would like to see the recycling systems in businesses and organisations mirroring that of households. That would mean that, no matter where you are — work, home, school or elsewhere — in Northern Ireland, recycling will be the same, making it simple for everyone to understand and participate in.

Animal Welfare Policy

11. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline his plans for animal welfare policy in the 2022-27 mandate. (AQO 420/22-27)

Mr Muir: I have listened to calls for the reform of animal welfare in Northern Ireland and carefully considered what is needed to enhance protections for our animals. Whilst I am determined to bring forward legislation on important animal welfare issues, I am cognisant of the time remaining in this mandate and what can be achieved within the resources available to my Department. That said, I can confirm that, over the next 12 months, it is my intention to bring forward legislation in several key areas.

With regard to our companion animals, alongside the forthcoming public safety rules on XL bully-type dogs, I plan to introduce a ban on the third-party sale of pups and kittens. With regard to our farmed animals, it is my intention to consult on the introduction of mandatory CCTV in slaughterhouses. Additionally, my officials have been working on the necessary preparations for a legislative consent motion to create specific offences for the abduction of cats and dogs, recognising that they are not merely property. It is my hope that the Assembly will debate the motion later this month.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for his reply and for the issues addressed in it. More specifically, what plans does he have, if any, with regard to the introduction of Lucy's law in Northern Ireland?

Mr Muir: I am conscious that Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom yet to ban the third-party sale of pups and kittens. My officials have been exploring options for the regulation of the third-party sale of pups and kittens and are working at pace on developing options for my consideration. I will carefully consider all options presented to me and then decide on the best option for appropriately regulating the third-party sale of pups and kittens in Northern Ireland. Any proposals will, of course, be publicly consulted on.

I add that this is not where I want to end. I have strong ambitions for the time ahead, and I want to achieve those as part of a co-design process with relevant stakeholders.

Windsor Framework: Documentary Checks

12. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

whether documentary checks will be affected by the Windsor Framework (Implementation) Regulations 2024. (AQO 421/22-27)

Mr Muir: Following the coming into force of the Windsor Framework (Implementation) Regulations 2024, implementation of the requirements of the Official Controls Regulations in Northern Ireland, which include documentary checks, is something that no longer sits within my ministerial responsibilities and now comes under the direction and control of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Mr Speaker: We do not have time for a supplementary question, unfortunately, so we will move to topical questions.

3.15 pm

Lough Neagh: Green Algae

T1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he is aware of the emergence of green algae on Lough Neagh, including at about 1 foot beneath the surface of the water. (AQT 271/22-27)

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. I am indeed, and that is why we need to move at pace on the issues with Lough Neagh. In the time ahead, I will continue to engage with my Executive colleagues on the adoption of an environmental improvement plan for Northern Ireland, because we need to take a strategic approach to the matter. However, we also need to take actions on the ground. Whilst I will continue to want to engage with colleagues in order to agree that environmental improvement plan for Northern Ireland, there is urgency on the issue. I will make announcements over the weeks ahead.

Mr McGlone: Thank you for that, Minister. Can you advise whether there is any allocated budget for Lough Neagh recovery?

Mr Muir: I bid for resource and capital funding for that. I received £1.6 million of capital but did not receive any resource. The budget allocation to my Department was disappointing, but I am not going to stop there. I am engaging with officials to see where we can reallocate resources in the Department so that we can put the necessary resources into that area. It will not be all that I want. I will make significant bids in the monitoring round and to transformation funding, because this is a key priority for me.

We need to invest in and turn the situation at Lough Neagh around. I will see how we can reprioritise things in my Department in order to ensure that we can get a better future for the people, users and businesses around Lough Neagh.

Lough Neagh: Future Management and Ownership

T2. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, further to his recent meeting with the Earl of Shaftesbury, for an update on the future management and ownership of Lough Neagh. (AQT 272/22-27)

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her question. The future management and ownership of Lough Neagh is a long-term issue. The focus is on short- and medium-term interventions, which Patsy McGlone questioned me about recently. I welcome the recently announced engagement by the Lough Neagh Partnership on the Lough Neagh heritage resilience project. That has received £244,000 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Its envisaged completion date is November 2025. It is a two-year project, which will result in a 10-year plan. It will be open to public review and feedback, which will also include an economic appraisal and business plan.

Additionally, the programme will investigate the feasibility of acquiring and transferring ownership of the bed and soil to the public or community ownership. Whilst I await the outcome of that investigation, my preference, as Minister, is for community ownership of the lough. I have a strong desire to visit examples of where that has been achieved, such as Scotland's Isle of Ulva off Mull, where it was achieved in June 2018 following a community buyout. That should be actively explored.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister. You will be aware of concerns about the impact of sand extraction. What actions have you taken in response to those concerns?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her question. I am very aware of the concerns about the impact of sand extraction on Lough Neagh, and I recently I met officials about it. In response to that, I have asked for a scientific review to be undertaken on the impact of sand extraction on the environment. As Minister, I will be guided by the science and the evidence. It is important that we look at it from a scientific perspective.

Windsor Framework: Documentary Checks

T3. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in reference to oral question 12, to state who is directing whom in respect of documentary checks, given that although, in response to AQW 8444/22-27, he said that documentary checks lie under the control of His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the Windsor framework implementation regulations do not give the Secretary of State the power to direct HMRC. (AQT 273/22-27)

Mr Muir: Not me.

Mr Allister: Is that the best that the Minister can do? Can he not tell us who is controlling documentary checks, as opposed to physical checks? Physical checks are covered by the 2024 regulations, but documentary checks are not. Surely, we cannot have that vacuum. If they have not been removed from him or from HMRC, is HMRC where they still rest?

Mr Muir: I am here to answer questions on areas that are under my ministerial responsibility.

Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme: Applications

T4. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on when the rural micro capital grant scheme will open for applications (AQT 274/22-27)

Mr Muir: I am keen for the scheme to open as soon as possible. I have been engaging with officials on my budget. I am keen that there is an allocation for it and that we are able to launch it as soon as possible. I engaged with officials last week and on Thursday 25 April, which was the day of the Budget agreement. I will do that again this week. I want to be able to make an announcement on it, because I know that a number of people want to see that scheme being rolled out.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Hopefully, he is aware of just how important the scheme is to rural communities. It may be the only option that is available to them. It is usually released every October. Can the Minister be more definitive on the timescale for opening the scheme?

Mr Muir: I would like to be able to announce a way forward on it by the beginning of June.

Veterinary Medicine Supplies

T5. **Mr Kingston** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to state the efforts that he and his officials are making to contribute to the resolution of the matter referred to in the recent letter from the House of Lords subcommittee on the Windsor framework, which was on the issue of veterinary medicine supplies to Northern Ireland, emphasising the need for a swift solution between the UK and the EU in the interests of animal health, the food supply chain and, ultimately, public health, given that the grace period will expire at the end of next year. (AQT 275/22-27)

Mr Muir: I am very aware of the concerns around this, which are raised with me regularly. That issue does not fit within my area of responsibility; it is the responsibility of the UK Government in their negotiations with the European Union. We know the protocol on engagement with the European Union, as set out by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I stepped forward and volunteered to get involved in the veterinary medicines working group because I understand the importance of the issue and of getting a resolution to it. I went to London for a meeting, I have had online meetings and I have engaged with Ministers on it. It is important that we get a resolution, but it has to be mutually agreed. We need to find a durable and mutually agreed resolution. My personal preference is for a veterinary agreement and alignment between the UK and the EU on the matter. Some share that opinion and others do not, but we need to engage with people, build trust and find solutions.

Mr Kingston: I thank the Minister for his reply and for the attention that he has given to the matter. I am sure that those in rural communities, in particular, would appreciate a written response in due course, perhaps to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, on his efforts on the matter.

Mr Muir: It would be difficult for me to provide a written response, because it is not my responsibility. I am happy to write to the Member on the work that I have done on it. I consider it as important. In politics, we need to focus on solutions, and that is what I am focused on. Far too many people are focused on exaggerating problems and not listening. We need to listen, and we need to focus on

solutions. That is what I am doing day and daily, and I am enjoying it.

XL Bullies

T6. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the work that he and his officials have conducted to assuage the concerns of the USPCA and the NSPCA about his position on XL bullies and his breed-specific legislation. (AQT 276/22-27)

Mr Muir: I am aware of the concerns. I engaged with the USPCA before I made the announcement in the Chamber. I recognised that there would probably be a difference of opinion on it. I was presented with a public-safety issue and the current legislation. I know what the calls are from the organisations that you outlined: that we should deal with the deed and not the breed. I am very keen to engage with those organisations and for them to present me with proposals on how we can legislate for that and bring it into being. As I responded to John Blair, I want to go through a process of co-design of future legislation. That will probably elicit a bit more on how we can move beyond the legislation that we have at the moment. There is a genuine desire to find solutions on the issue.

Mr Frew: Will that co-design of legislation on XL bullies include dog owners and dog lovers? Have he and his Department noticed any trends or adverse effects from his statement in the House that day?

Mr Muir: There has been a continued increase in the number of dogs that have been registered and licensed as XL bullies. I recognise that that number is probably an underestimate, because people have to voluntarily identify the breed and register it. We are unique in Northern Ireland in having a licensing system that allows us to identify breeds. I am aware that the scale of the issue may be vastly underrepresented. I understand that the overwhelming majority of people who have XL bullies will recognise the public-safety issues. They may not agree with what I have done, but I have done it for public safety. We are a nation of dog lovers and a nation that cares for our animals. We want to find a way forward that provides protection for them. That is what I want to do in the area of animal welfare.

It was a difficult decision. It was really hard for me to make that decision, but I was presented with the legislation. You all know the statistics on the number of people who have been killed

or seriously injured by those animals. It is really hard to see the examples of that. People may disagree with me, but, hopefully, they do so from the point of view of respect, given the fact that I made my decision based on the evidence that was presented to me.

Forests for Our Future

T7. **Mrs Dodds** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after associating herself with the remarks about the sad and shocking passing of Jennifer Fulton, for an update on the Forests for Our Future programme. (AQT 277/22-27)

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her opening remarks. The Department is reeling after that. I think especially of Norman, who is grieving the loss. It is just very hard to comprehend, to be honest, and life will never be the same.

We are working through the budget, and I have been looking at what we can allocate to Forests for Our Future, which aligns with my ambitions for forestation and our climate change obligations. I will be able to give a further update on the programme, as it is something that I am keen to do. There is the issue of where we prioritise tree planting. My personal preference is that we should prioritise planting in catchment areas, which is particularly relevant to the discussion that we had about Lough Neagh. I was in the Upper Bann catchment area on Friday, around Katesbridge — I cannot remember whose constituency that is — and it was good to see the good work being done there, with the Rivers Trust engaging with farmers. If we can encourage more tree planting in catchment areas, that could have a real benefit.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. That is an important programme whereby we can enhance the environment and really do something quite special. Over the next five years, how much will it cost the Department to meet the climate change targets that were set by the House? As his Department is responsible for the policy, has he had negotiations and conversations with his Executive colleagues so that we understand how much this will cost across the whole of government?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her questions. I have lead responsibility for that legislation, but the overall responsibility falls to all Ministers. I am holding a number of bilateral meetings with Ministers. Last week, I met the Infrastructure Minister to discuss the obligations arising from

the climate change legislation and the need to adopt a climate action plan and carbon budgets. I will engage with the Finance Minister on that tomorrow. This is part of a scoping exercise for what will be needed for the first climate action plan. That will list the potential costs associated with the plan.

There is a cost of inaction. I will continue to make representations to the UK Government, and to any potential replacement, on the need to make those investments. By making those investments, we can turn Northern Ireland round and make it somewhere that attracts investment and economic success. However, we need the capital and resource funding from the UK Government to enable us to meet those obligations. That is particularly relevant this week, the week of the Balmoral show, and when it comes to future agricultural support, which is relevant to these issues as well. The UK Government need to come forward with the level of support that we need to be able to support our farmers in the time ahead.

Animal Welfare: Legislation

T8. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has considered legislation to extend the powers given to local councils to improve animal welfare, given that, in a previous answer, he outlined his legislative priorities for animal welfare. (AQT 278/22-27)

Mr Muir: The Executive will shortly publish their legislative programme. That will be for this calendar year. I have a desire to do other legislation over the next number of years, including, I hope, primary legislation on animal welfare. We need to look at the powers of government to deal with these issues, and I am happy to include animal welfare in that.

Ms Sugden: It is great to hear that. The biggest frustration with animal welfare is how limited councils are in approaching cases brought to their attention. Is there anything that we can do in the meantime? Unfortunately, horrific cases are happening, and the answer is that we simply cannot do anything.

Mr Muir: The legislation as it sits does give powers for action. I encourage anyone who is aware of any incidents of animal cruelty to report them to allow for investigation. It is key that we do that. We have fallen behind in a number of areas, and one that we talked about earlier was Lucy's law, which I want to bring up to scratch. I want to be clear that when we bring forward legislation, it is done in partnership with

district councils and relevant stakeholder organisations so that it is fit for purpose. What people may want as a policy is sometimes difficult to translate into legislation, and I do not want to enact legislation that does not have the required teeth.

Mr Speaker: There is no time for further questions, so we will draw to a conclusion questions to the Minister. We now return to the debate.

3.30 pm

Opposition Business

Programme for Government

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes that the devolved institutions have now been restored for 100 days; recognises the challenging financial situation facing the Executive; acknowledges the need for an improved fiscal framework that recognises the underfunding of public services in Northern Ireland; further notes that the parties now in the Executive engaged with the Northern Ireland Civil Service on Programme for Government commitments for a sustained period prior to the restoration of devolved government; regrets that the Executive have yet to confirm a date for the publication of a Programme for Government in their first 100 days in office; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to commit to publishing a Programme for Government or a summary of key planned Programme for Government outcomes before the Assembly summer recess. — [Mr O'Toole.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out from "regrets" to "office" and insert:

"further recognises that there is Executive agreement on priorities, including childcare, reducing hospital waiting lists, tackling violence against women and girls, special educational needs, housing, developing a globally competitive economy and reform and transformation of public services" — [Mr Harvey.]

Mr O'Toole: I am pleased to make a winding-up speech on the motion. It feels a little strange, because we had a break for Question Time during which we had a substantial discussion on the various priorities that Ministers and all Members have. I will reflect on a few of the comments made by Members, and I will, hopefully, secure support. We had, I think, broad cross-party support for our motion. I will say early on that we have no particular difficulty with the DUP amendment. With the greatest of respect, I am not entirely clear exactly what it adds to the motion, but I do not dispute that there has been some indication that those are the Executive parties' priorities, because they have been debated in the Chamber. The motion's substantive point is that those priorities now need to be converted into a plan for

delivery, which is the Programme for Government that we want to see delivered by the time that we break up for the summer. We do not believe that that is unacceptable or unreasonable.

We also think that, if the Programme for Government document is not deliverable, there is no reason why we should not have a list of key summary outcomes. I asked the deputy First Minister about that at Question Time and received a diplomatically worded answer about seeing delivery "shortly" or "as quickly as possible". I respect that, without trying to create hostages to fortune, but, if parties support our motion, we, as the Opposition, and the public will interpret that support as a commitment to abide by the terms of the motion, even though, as with all other motions that we have passed in the previous couple of months, it is non-binding. I will take Executive parties at their word in agreeing that, by summer recess, by the first week in July, we will have either the Programme for Government or the key summary outcomes from it.

I will go through a few of the points. Winding-up speeches are better if people respond to criticisms and points that have been raised rather than simply summarising what others have said. Mr Harvey moved the amendment and said that a Programme for Government was not a substitute for delivery. That is, of course, true. He said that strategies can sit on the shelf. He is completely right that strategies can sit on a shelf and not be delivered. The motion is about delivery. There have been lots of draft Programmes for Government that were never agreed and other strategies that have never been implemented, but the first and most important thing is to have the strategy down on paper, because, otherwise, there is no way of judging the Executive and the Executive parties on their delivery.

It was interesting to hear Ms Bradshaw, the Chair of the TEO Committee. I welcome the fact that Alliance will support the motion. Ms Bradshaw said that the Executive Office was "rather dysfunctional". The Opposition have a key role to play in a way in which we have not seen in these institutions historically. Even if Executive parties have different constitutional aspirations or look in different directions when it comes to left/right political orientation, they have a responsibility to form a cohesive Government and tell the public what they are delivering on their behalf and not to govern by improvisation. I am aware that the deputy First Minister objected to my use of that term. I will not say that it is like improvised comedy, because I do not think that it is always that

funny, but there has been a degree of improvisation in the past and a reliance on PR and staged fallings-out. However, I welcome the fact that it looks like Executive parties will support the motion.

I agree with several Members who said that the stop-start nature of government here is completely inseparable from the public's frustrations about how we have performed. That is the blunt truth. We still do not have agreement from Sinn Féin or the DUP on fundamentally reforming the institutions to prevent the one-party veto. We endeavoured to pass a motion on that on our first Opposition day, and those parties did not support it. That is a blunt truth, and we do not yet have agreement from the First Minister or deputy First Minister that they will decline to use their power to resign and collapse the institutions at some point. Those veto powers have never been given up, not even rhetorically, let alone in substance. It is also worth saying in passing that we were told at that point that it would be at the Assembly and Executive Review Committee that all the ambitious reform would be taken forward. I am yet to see the AERC take it forward. I am not sure whether it will bring forward the ambitious plan of reform that we discussed on that day in February.

A couple of DUP Members raised the particular point that there has never been a Programme for Government in the first 100 days of an Executive. In the literal, factual sense, that is true. Members said that, going back to the initial Executive, when Seamus Mallon and then Mark Durkan were deputy First Minister alongside David Trimble as First Minister, they took longer to agree a Programme for Government. That is factually true, but the context was a little different. That was 26 years ago. It was the first time that we had had a proper and durable new power-sharing institution. The comparison is pretty trite, and I do not think that a lot of people will wear it. Of course, it is also true to say that, this year, we are celebrating or marking the 50th anniversary of the first attempt at a substantive power-sharing Administration in Northern Ireland. For a variety of reasons, we were not able or were not allowed to make that work. People can draw their own historical conclusions, but it is not a completely fair comparison.

Today marks 100 days since the institutions came back. That is an important landmark. It is an important milestone at which to say to the people who hold office, "Where's the plan?" and, "What's happening?". I will come on to a bit of what the deputy First Minister said. Yes, 100 days is an important milestone, but, with

respect and through the Chair, you and the Executive parties have not simply been debating a Programme for Government for 100 days; rather, as the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party put on record during the debate, a Programme for Government has been being debated since June 2022. That is getting on for two years. We, as the prospective Opposition, were briefed about the fact that there were ongoing Programme for Government meetings that were apparently substantial and substantive. All four Executive parties were in rooms — maybe with whiteboards, flip charts and Post-it notes — talking about priorities. Those meetings were convened by the head of the Civil Service. I was not there, so I do not know what all the sessions were about. Other Members in the Chamber were there, so perhaps they can tell me whether I am wrong. Perhaps it was improvisation or team building. People laugh, but there were nearly two years of meetings. All that the motion calls for is for key outcomes and targets to be published by the Executive parties. That is not in any way unreasonable.

A range of comments was made. Mr Allister, in his particular way, made points about Executive performance. I will challenge Mr Allister on one point with which I fundamentally disagree, which is his depiction of "begging-bowl politics". From most of what he says, I think that he believes that Northern Ireland should stay in the United Kingdom. Obviously, I do not think that, but the whole basis on which this place operates is that we get a block grant from London. If that is a begging bowl, I am afraid that, contrary to what the Member spends a lot of his time moaning about, we really are in a situation in which we are not equal citizens. People in Belfast pay tax on an exactly equal basis to people in Birmingham and Bristol, so, to call it "begging-bowl politics" —.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I will give way in a second. To call the act of simply pursuing equitable finances "begging-bowl politics" is, I am afraid, not acceptable. I challenge that. I will give way to him.

Mr Allister: "Begging-bowl politics" is the beg-and-blame approach of Sinn Féin. It would not matter how many billions we were given; there would never be enough to squander, because, from its perspective, Northern Ireland cannot be seen to work. That is what the begging-bowl politics are linked to, and that is what the DUP has, sadly, played a supporting role in.

Mr O'Toole: The Member has put his remarks on the record.

What I would say about that is that we need a better financial settlement from the UK Government — I do not dispute that, and we have been on record supporting the Executive parties — but we also need a plan. No one says that the Executive are not operating within constraints, such as having an austerity-obsessed Tory Government, and, yes, there are the challenges of mandatory coalition and a period of high inflation. All of those are challenges, but there needs to be a plan.

In her response to me, the deputy First Minister said that lots of things have happened. I am sure that all of those individually — a million pounds here and there — are important initiatives, but that is the everyday business of government. It cannot be called a Programme for Government or a serious strategic vision for the region with targets and outcomes for when waiting lists will come down, when there will be a meaningful intervention on childcare that will help working families with costs or when we will see poverty addressed. All that we ask for is a plan. That is not unreasonable or unfair; it is the bare minimum of government. I hope that the motion will pass and that it will be delivered on. Wouldn't that be something?

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that the devolved institutions have now been restored for 100 days; recognises the challenging financial situation facing the Executive; acknowledges the need for an improved fiscal framework that recognises the underfunding of public services in Northern Ireland; further notes that the parties now in the Executive engaged with the Northern Ireland Civil Service on Programme for Government commitments for a sustained period prior to the restoration of devolved government; further recognises that there is Executive agreement on priorities, including childcare, reducing hospital waiting lists, tackling violence against women and girls, special educational needs, housing, developing a globally competitive economy and reform and transformation of public services; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to commit to publishing a Programme for Government or a summary of key planned

Programme for Government outcomes before the Assembly summer recess.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease until we move to the next item of business.

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

Independent Environmental Protection Agency

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item in the Order Paper is an Opposition motion on an independent environmental protection agency.

Mr McGlone: I beg to move

That this Assembly declares an ecological and biodiversity crisis; acknowledges the complex characteristics of biodiversity and ecological breakdown in Lough Neagh, which includes high concentrations of phosphates and nitrates from agricultural run-off, the durability of the waste water infrastructure, the impact of invasive species and the catalyst of higher temperatures caused by the climate crisis; notes the resolution of the Assembly to address management of the lough; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to address the ecological crisis by bringing forward legislation to establish an independent environmental protection agency by the end of this Assembly mandate.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Maith go leor. *[Translation: All right.]* The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one and a half hours for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. As an amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List, the Business Committee has agreed that 15 minutes will be added to the total time for the debate.

Mr McGlone: It is with some disappointment that I move the motion today, not because of a lack of enthusiasm or a lack of need to establish an independent environmental protection agency or because of the urgency with which that is needed, but because we should have had an agency in place already. Like many necessary developments, it has been promised and delayed repeatedly by Executive parties. That is one of the reasons why we cannot support the amendment, because, unfortunately, it would introduce yet another delay in implementing a commitment

that had already been given in the 'New Decade, New Approach' (NDNA) agreement of 2020. What is strange is that the Ulster Unionist Party used to support an independent environmental protection agency: I look forward to some clarity on that after a while. The SDLP, along with the Green Party and Alliance, has supported an independent environmental protection agency since the 2002-06 review of public administration (RPA) and we stated that support in our Assembly election manifesto in 2003.

In 2007, following a review of environmental governance in Northern Ireland, the Assembly debated an Alliance Party motion calling on the Executive to establish an independent environmental protection agency for Northern Ireland, as recommended in the review's report, 'Foundations for the future'. The Ulster Unionist Party and Sinn Féin supported the motion, but, while the Ulster Unionists supported our amendment in that debate, to establish an independent environmental protection agency in the lifetime of that Assembly, Sinn Féin did not. Sinn Féin, however, supported a DUP amendment that called for more work to be undertaken — a repeat of *déjà-vu*? — before decisions could be taken. It was ever thus.

3.45 pm

By the way, the previous motion, unchanged, was agreed by the Assembly in 2007. Then, as now, the North was the only region in Ireland or Britain that did not have an independent environmental protection agency. To quote the former leader of the Alliance Party, David Ford, in the 2007 debate:

*"Either they are all wrong, or we are wrong."
— [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 24, p72, col 2].*

We know the answer to that question.

I mention that to point out that the DUP has always opposed an independent environmental protection agency. It has always sought to delay any decision on its establishment. Even though a commitment was given in the New Decade, New Approach agreement in 2020 for that very agency, unfortunately, the DUP Minister responsible repeatedly ignored it.

The New Decade, New Approach commitment envisaged an independent environmental protection agency that could oversee work on climate change and ensure that the necessary targets would be met. We eventually got a Climate Change Act in 2022, primarily because

of individual Members of the Assembly rather than the then Minister, but anyway. It was a twin-track process, if you like, as any of us who were on the AERA Committee at the time know.

We are still waiting for an independent environmental protection agency. After the Assembly motion in 2007, there was some change. In 2008, under a DUP Minister, the Environment and Heritage Service, an arm's-length agency of the then Department of the Environment, was essentially rebranded as the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). In May 2016, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs was created, and, again under a DUP Minister, the NIEA was brought fully into that Department.

We had a review, and the Executive, controlled by the same two parties that control it today, ignored both the review and the Assembly. That is where we are today, having travelled in the opposite direction to that recommended by the review of environmental governance in 2007. It is important to note the findings of the auditor general's recent report on water quality: since 2015, the water quality in our rivers and lakes has got worse, not better, and we will miss the 2027 EU targets for water quality standards.

In February, the Assembly debated the ecological crisis in Lough Neagh and called on the Executive to put in place a new management structure and plan for the lough — which is very dear to me — so that it can be managed, protected and promoted in the interests of all. I will not repeat all the arguments from that debate. The Minister and his Department know well what the underlying problem is: it is the build-up of excessive levels of nutrients in the lough — the phosphorus and nitrogen. Other factors come into play, but that is the underlying issue that needs to be resolved. Since 2020, the lough has been in poor status, which is just one level above the lowest status of bad in the ecological and chemical condition of the water. We have seen decreases in the numbers of all the main species in the lough, most notably pollan.

On a wider note, last year's 'State of Nature' report showed a continuing decline in biodiversity, with 12% of Northern Irish species threatened with extinction. The Department's figures tell us that over 60% of the phosphorus in our rivers and lakes originates from agriculture, with 24% coming from waste water treatment facilities and 12% from septic tanks. There has been a recorded increase in the level of phosphorus in Lough Neagh since 2015, and a steady and, indeed, sharp rise — I have seen the graph — in the level of nitrates from 2017 to

2022. A recent report commissioned by Farmers for Action attributed that particularly sharp increase to the ambitions of the Executive's Going for Growth strategy, which was introduced around that time. The report identified attempts at increased crop production, leading to a much-increased use of nitrogen-based fertilisers, as the reason behind the rise.

The auditor general's report on water quality noted that, between 2017 and 2021, 373 pollution incidents linked to farming and 68 incidents linked to NI Water were deemed to be of high or medium severity. More than half — 53% — of all water pollution incidents linked to agriculture in 2022 happened in the Neagh Bann river basin district (RBD). Most of those incidents were in the River Blackwater area, with farm effluent mixture, silage and cattle waste most frequently detected.

Agriculture accounts for 77% of the total land area of Northern Ireland, but only about 1% of farms are inspected by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. I have to put on the record that most farmers are ecologically tuned in. They want to see the environment kept and to be its custodians. However, there are those who clearly do not.

Perhaps the Minister will be able to update us on the recommendations of the cross-departmental task force on Lough Neagh. We are facing another summer of potentially toxic algal blooms. As I mentioned, people have reported to me that the algal blooms are already starting to evolve beneath the surface and, indeed, are manifesting on the surface of Lough Neagh. With warnings issued to the public, as well as to the tourism industry, I would like to think that we will take action before we reach that point again this year.

The task force identified 113 actions that statutory organisations and the wider public can take to address the problem in the lough. In addition to mitigating measures, it made several recommendations to specifically address the build-up of excessive levels of nutrients in the lough. Among the recommended key actions are enforcing the existing regulations; reductions to the levels of phosphates in animal feeds; the development of a policy to eliminate the use of chemical phosphorus fertiliser on grasslands; and, of course, an updated nitrates policy. A cash injection of £131 million for NI Water was the estimated cost of upgrading 18 waste water treatment works.

As I mentioned, although the Assembly had already called for the Executive to put in place a

new management structure and a plan for Lough Neagh, there have been attempts to improve the management of the lough. The stakeholder Lough Neagh Partnership was formed in 2003. That is a partnership with a defined role to play, but it lacks resources and powers. However, a single overarching body that could have had the necessary resources and powers to manage and protect Lough Neagh was previously established. The leader of Sinn Féin in the Assembly was the Agriculture and Rural Development Minister at that time and was responsible for that. Following a Lough Neagh cross-departmental working group report in 2014 — 10 years ago — when the ownership of the lough was a talking point, there was support for a community-led approach to the ownership and management of the lough. The Lough Neagh development trust was established in early 2016, and an interim board was appointed to lead the trust through membership recruitment and the election of a permanent board. Despite the development trust's attempts to secure funding to allow it to progress its work, successive Ministers failed to commit the required additional resources.

I wish the Minister the best of luck in his negotiations with the Executive to empower an effective, professional management body for Lough Neagh, hopefully, with oversight from an independent EPA. However, the Assembly should again make its ambition clear: it is not just the immediate response of the Minister and the Executive that is important; it is their commitment to follow through on the decisions that they take and to properly fund the required response to the ongoing ecological crisis in our environment. Key to that response is the establishment of an independent EPA, as recommended by the review of environmental governance (REGNI) in 2007.

As was committed to in the New Decade, New Approach agreement of 2020, the office of environmental protection will still have a crucial role to play, and an independent EPA will have to work closely with it. The importance of the EPA's being an independent body has already been demonstrated, as the threat of legal action from the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) forced the Department to change its approach to providing ammonia guidance for council planning decisions. The non-independent NI Environment Agency was unable or unwilling to do that, because it is an environment agency that still cannot take samples at waste water treatment works without telling NI Water in advance. An independent environmental protection agency is

a vital part of modern environmental governance.

It is necessary to secure and maintain public trust in the ability of governance —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Patsy, you are well over your time.

Mr McGlone: —to protect and nurture the natural environment. Future generations will judge the Assembly by how we respond to that.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Go raibh maith agat as sin, a Patsy. [*Translation: Thank you for that, Patsy.*] I call Tom Elliott to move the amendment.

Mr Elliott: I beg to move the following amendment:

After "bringing forward" insert:

"a review of environmental governance, including potential" — [Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs).]

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Tom. You have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr Elliott: To be fair, I welcome the motion, which has come from those on the Opposition Benches. I have no difficulty with the Opposition's tabling it. The previous Member to speak had a go at the Ulster Unionist Party, but I will not do the same to the SDLP or any other party, because I want to do what is right for Northern Ireland.

I note and accept the principle about Lough Neagh, which is part of the Opposition motion, but blue-green algae is in a lot of other areas, not just Lough Neagh. We have it in Lough Erne in County Fermanagh. It is widespread in England and Scotland. I noticed that Waterways Ireland warned about it some time ago in areas of the Republic of Ireland. The Republic has an independent Environmental Protection Agency, but it has not been able to stop the algae. England has the Environment Agency, which is a non-departmental public body sponsored by DEFRA. I do not know whether you can call that independent, but that is what they have in England. I am not so sure, therefore, that every region has an independent environmental protection agency. By the way, I have no major difficulty with such an agency.

Mr McGlone suggested that we had changed our position. Nowhere have we said that we have changed our position. What we do not want, however, is a plethora of agencies and organisations that oversee the environment, because we will end up with a situation where, as with Lough Neagh and Lough Erne, nobody knows where the responsibilities lie. That is the difficulty that we have. What do you do? Do you just add another agency to the environment aspect of the Department, and, all of a sudden, the Minister is lumped with another agency that his Department or the Executive have to pay for? The real problem is that one will blame the other.

What I want to see is a proper review. That does not have to take ages; it could be done quite quickly. I am sure that the Minister and others know exactly what they want to do. We have the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, which has a couple of separate organisations. We have shared environmental health services, which, I accept, are council bodies, but they still have oversight of environmental issues. We have the Office for Environmental Protection. We will probably have a climate change commissioner soon. We have councils and environmental health overseeing some of it. We also have Waterways Ireland and the Public Health Agency. All I ask is that we have a proper, organised and structured review ASAP so that we can see which agencies we may not need and how we can change the powers or responsibilities. If an independent environmental protection agency is required and that is the right way to go, let us do it. However, that will not stop the blue-green algae. It will take a lot more than an independent environmental protection agency to stop that process. That is a much wider issue than just putting in place an independent environmental protection agency or, indeed, getting Lough Neagh moved from private ownership to government ownership.

Lough Erne, for example, is probably publicly owned — there is no private ownership of it — but nobody can accept who has responsibility for it. Waterways Ireland is there. Rivers Agency has some responsibility. The council, I assume, has some responsibility, and perhaps even NI Water does too. I am sure that DAERA has some responsibility. We need to be exact about who has responsibility for what, otherwise people and organisations will blame each other, no matter which element they represent.

I would like to see an overall structure. Waterways Ireland, for example, has no responsibility whatsoever for Lough Neagh. Why is that? At the time of whatever deal was

made, Lough Neagh was not put within Waterways Ireland's structure. Is there anything to stop us — I do not know the answer to this — giving overall responsibility to Waterways Ireland? I do not know.

A huge number of questions need to be resolved. It is not as simple as some Members have outlined in that, if you put an independent environmental protection agency in place, you will get the lough under public control again and all will be rosy in the garden. I can tell you that it will not be. It will take a lot more than that to make this better.

I note the figures that have been mooted: 62% of the phosphorus entering Northern Ireland's water environment comes from agriculture, 24% comes from waste water treatment works and 12% comes from septic tanks. Those figures have been mentioned on a number of occasions here and in other places. I am sure that the Minister will want to raise that issue.

Those figures appear to come from a 2020 Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) report that deals specifically with phosphorus. A quotation from that report reads:

"There is an important gap in knowledge as to the current state of P[hosphorus] within UK agriculture, the wider food system, and the natural environment."

That says that there is a huge knowledge gap, but, as far as I can see, the report gives no indication of the methodology — I apologise if it does, and somebody can put me right, if that is the case — used to reach those figures. Are they estimates? Was there some sort of methodology that is not in that report? I cannot see it. How did those figures come about? Obviously, people will question them. I question them. I am not saying that they are wrong; I merely want to know how they came about. In fairness, that situation applies in wider Northern Ireland waterways, as I understand, and not just in Lough Neagh, but there are a huge number of questions without answers in that respect.

4.00 pm

Northern Ireland already has environmental governance in place. A complex, overlapping structure of organisations has responsibility for our environment, such as the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the Office for Environmental Protection and, as was mentioned, Shared Environmental Services. Indeed, we might soon have a climate change commissioner.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency has established five key priorities: working towards a fully compliant regulated industry; delivering freshwater environment at "good" status; tackling waste sector crime; supporting good habitat, earth science and landscape quality and enhancing species abundance and diversity; and the promotion of environmentally sustainable development, infrastructure and access to quality green and blue spaces. Can anybody argue against any of those? I certainly cannot, and I commend the agency for having those principles and priorities. I assume that the difficulty is that, maybe, they are not all being implemented. I am not sure. However, those priorities, to me, factor in what we want in Northern Ireland. Will an independent environment agency do exactly the same thing? It may, but that is why I ask for an immediate review, so that the Minister, his Department and the Executive do not pay for a plethora of organisations and agencies on top of what we already have but with nobody, ultimately, taking responsibility.

I will leave it there. I commend the amendment.

Mrs Dillon: I will speak in support of the motion, and I thank its sponsors for bringing it to the Floor.

There is no doubt that we are in the midst of an ecological and biodiversity crisis. Ireland has suffered one of the worst biodiversity declines in Europe. The curlew and the great yellow bumblebee are on the verge of extinction. Entire species will have gone for ever. I acknowledge the ongoing hard work by the Lough Neagh Partnership and many individuals and community groups along the lough shore to protect both. Things are no better in our waters, where iconic fish such as the Atlantic salmon, the European eel and the angel shark have suffered catastrophic population declines. The freshwater pearl mussel, Ireland's longest living animal, faces extinction.

The loss of those species is more than just a pity. Declines in biodiversity are intrinsically linked to climate change, falls in food production and even our ability to fend off infectious diseases. The OECD has stated that safeguarding biodiversity is vital in avoiding the next pandemic. In addition to the declaration of an ecological and biodiversity crisis, we need to see the urgent development of an all-Ireland biodiversity strategy to help us to halt and reverse the decline of our island's unique flora and fauna.

Perhaps the most visible example of the ecological disaster that we face is Lough

Neagh. Maybe, like Mr McGlone, I am being a wee bit parochial in ignoring Lough Erne, but parochial I am. The presence of toxic blue-green algae has been caused by a perfect storm of increased temperatures, invasive species and man-made pollution. The cultural, historical, environmental, economic and public health importance of the lough cannot be overstated, and every effort must be made to restore and preserve it. While it is true that the lough cannot be fixed overnight, there are things that we can do now to aid its recovery. We need to see the creation of a new management authority that is multi-agency and cross-departmental in nature. Crucially, it must involve local stakeholders, communities and fishermen at every level. I declare an interest as the wife of a fly fisherman who has my heart broken on the issue.

For that body to work effectively and efficiently, it is also vital that the entirety of the lough, including its bed and shore, be brought into public ownership. We can save Lough Neagh, but it will require all of us to work together. Lough Neagh is a treasured gem of Ireland's natural landscape, but it faces significant challenges. Pollution, invasive species and the impact of climate change have all taken their toll on its once-vibrant ecosystem. However, amidst those challenges lies an opportunity for us to come together and protect the heart of our community. Establishing an independent environmental protection agency is not just a necessity but the right thing to do. The agency would serve as a guardian of the lough, ensuring that its health and vitality are safeguarded for generations to come. It would provide the oversight and accountability needed to hold those who harm our environment accountable and drive positive change. I agree with Mr McGlone: most farmers are very responsible. They love the land and want to look after it. We need to acknowledge that.

Any independent EPA must be fully independent and equipped with the powers necessary to take on major polluters. While we appreciate the work that individuals on the OEP have done, it is simply not fit for purpose as an environmental watchdog here. The North needs a bespoke body that will focus entirely on matters here and work in tandem with the EPA and agencies in the rest of Ireland to protect and preserve our shared environment.

Let us remember the words of Oscar Wilde:

"The things of nature do not really belong to us. We should leave them to our children as we have received them."

Let us honour that sentiment by acting as responsible stewards of our environment and ensuring a brighter and more sustainable future for all.

Miss McIlveen: I support the amendment. Appropriate environmental oversight is extremely important. Unfortunately, the motion does not fully cover the appropriate outcomes or steps to reach the outcomes that are needed to be effective. There is no acknowledgement of the lessons that should have been learned from the establishment of bodies being tasked to carry out certain roles.

It is important to point out Northern Ireland Water's role in polluting our waters. While the motion mentions:

"the durability of the waste water infrastructure",

that underplays what has happened and what continues to occur. Between 2005 and 2022, which is the most recent year for which we have figures, Northern Ireland Water was responsible for 3,576 pollution incidents. Over 18% of pollution incidents come from one body. Between 2017 and the end of 2021, 591 pollution incidents were linked to the operations of Northern Ireland Water, with 28 warning letters and £150,000 handed out in fines. However, that did not prevent more incidents.

Northern Ireland Water is a body that is wholly owned by the Department for Infrastructure, but, disappointingly, that Department feels that figures on the discharge of sewage into our watercourses are an operational matter for Northern Ireland Water. That should be a matter of priority for the Department for Infrastructure. Of course, Northern Ireland Water needs an adequate funding model and, perhaps, restructuring to allow it to borrow to invest, but that does not appear to be on the Department's agenda either. Here we have the example of a fully owned public body that is inadequately funded and absorbs the fines because it simply cannot afford to address the problem. The mere establishment of another body will not address that problem. The Department and the Executive need to address that problem. There is a clear need for Northern Ireland to be properly funded by Treasury, but that should not preclude us from taking the steps that are necessary to address the problems in Northern Ireland Water, whether that includes additional funding or the reform of the structure.

As the proposer of the amendment said, we have already established bodies such as the

Northern Ireland Environment Agency and the Office for Environmental Protection. While they have distinct roles, they suffer from a lack of adequate funding. I asked the Minister, in questions for written answer, about the funding of the Office for Environmental Protection and was told that, because it is a new body, the right balance of funding for it had not yet been found. Each year, the OEP has not received the funding for which it has asked. As we know, any independent environment agency will be dependent on funding from a sponsor. I note that Friends of the Earth's view is that any independent environment agency should be well funded and staffed. I would like to see that for our existing bodies as well and for us to see the results of that funding. That is why I feel that the amendment is important.

Before we add another body to what we already have, we need a proper review of our environmental governance. Let us assess what works, what does not work and what is needed to make it more effective in delivering on our aims. Only then can we make a determination of where the gaps are and of how they can best be filled. The blind creation of another body to take resources out of a limited pot is not the right thing to do. I say that not from the perspective of ruling out an independent body but from the point of view of taking a sensible and pragmatic approach. We have a history of creating layer upon layer of governance while delivering less and less. It is time for better outcomes rather than more and more processes.

It is also important that an environmental improvement plan for Northern Ireland be brought forward by the Minister, and it must be one that can command cross-party support. While Lough Neagh is hugely important, accounting for almost 40% of our drinking water, a wider environmental issue also needs to be looked at. Any such plan needs to be balanced and deliverable. We have seen in other jurisdictions targets imposed to satisfy idealists only for them to be rowed back on, either because they are unachievable or because the damage caused to the economy and people's livelihoods is disproportionate.

Given the importance of environmental governance, what is in place needs to be reviewed as a whole before we add yet another layer. Let us have a balanced and sustainable environmental plan that we can unite behind, and let us implement measures that will address the largest polluter in this country and provide it with either the funding or the ability to raise its own capital.

Mr Blair: We should consider everything before us today and all our comments in both a global and a local context, because our basic human needs, such as access to food, shelter and clean air, are threatened as the climate struggles to cope with the strain. It must be put as bluntly as that.

Last summer, we witnessed a season full of intense heatwaves, floods, gorse fires locally and wildfires more generally across the globe. The winter also began with prolonged periods of rain and extreme flooding in many parts of Northern Ireland. In recent months, our farmers battled further weather challenges that threatened our food security. I have no doubt that we will face similar or worse situations in the coming months. In addition, we have been tackling and continue to tackle our own ecological crisis at Lough Neagh and across other areas of Northern Ireland, as blue-green algal blooms threaten species, the lives of those living along the lough shore, the livelihood of traders and recreational opportunities. The environmental crisis is something that we can no longer simply brush under the carpet for future consideration, as the consequences of our inaction are being felt now and will, without a doubt, continue to escalate. Indeed, the lack of a Government and, subsequently, governance in Northern Ireland for two years has only made delivering environmental protection initiatives much more difficult. We have missed many of the deadlines already published for urgently required and robust environmental and biodiversity strategies. For example, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs was to publish an environmental improvement plan by July 2023. That was not possible, however, owing to the absence of a Minister. Now, with a Minister in place and, I am glad to say, already active on the issues, we can and must make progress.

The environmental improvement plan that I have referenced is key to delivering and measuring progress. We know that the Minister is keen to secure Executive agreement for the plan, and I hope that it can be commenced as soon as possible. Alliance attempted to table an amendment to the motion to reflect the urgent need for approval of the plan, but it was not accepted. I have chosen to address the issue in my speech instead.

4.15 pm

We are content to support the motion, although it could be argued that an opportunity to link a meaningful environmental improvement plan to enforcement through an environmental

protection agency has been missed — a reminder, perhaps, that our frequent calls to eradicate silo thinking should be reflected in how we do business on the Floor of the House. It is clear to us that a properly funded and truly independent environmental protection agency is vital for tackling the climate crisis as well as environmental challenges and is something that Alliance has long called for, and, as Members mentioned, it was a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

I was reminded today that when the opportunity arose to include the office that we are talking about in the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, it was voted down. I have to point out that the party that tabled today's motion did not vote on the Alliance amendment to establish an independent environmental protection agency. We have often said that every policy and practice that has an environmental impact on Lough Neagh should and must be reviewed, including, for example, the sand dredging authorised by the previous SDLP Infrastructure Minister. That is another example of interdepartmental responsibility for required environmental improvement and action.

Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK and Ireland without an independent environmental protection agency. A new agency should act to increase the cross-border and cross-regional cooperation that is essential in fighting to protect a single biogeographical unit, irrespective of borders and boundaries. In 2022, the OEP's remit was extended to include Northern Ireland, meaning that it can now hold our Government and public bodies to account. However, problems and challenges remain, for example, with resources. The Office for Environmental Protection has no enforcement powers over private businesses and citizens. That reinforces the need for a bespoke Northern Ireland environmental protection agency.

In conclusion, I reiterate the Alliance Party's support for action —.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for taking the intervention. I appreciate the points that he makes about oversight and enforcement, but does the Member accept — this relates to Mr Elliott's point — that a range of scientific interventions will be required if we are to address the algae bloom on Lough Neagh? I appreciate that the Minister has probably done a lot through the Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) to initiate that work.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Very quickly, John. Interventions are meant to be brief, Patsy. Tá a fhios agat sin. [*Translation: You know that.*]

Mr Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): God loves a trier.

Mr Blair: I do not know, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, but I think that I am getting an extra minute. Am I?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes.

Mr Blair: I am about to address some of those points anyway.

I support the call for action on environment, driven by my colleague the AERA Minister, supported by the Executive and delivered through every level of government. As I said, we support the motion. Although I would like to support the amendment, I cannot do so for a number of reasons. First, it considerably weakens the original motion. Secondly, it calls for a review of environmental governance, which the Minister has already commenced. To be frank, the speech to move the amendment sounded like something between pollution scepticism and a case of, "Sure, we will just sit and wait a while to see what happens". I thank those who tabled the motion. I look forward to hearing more from the Minister on these matters.

Mr McAleer (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Committee. The Committee has taken evidence on and discussed a range of matters that the motion highlights. However, the Committee does not, at present, have a position on an independent environmental protection agency.

I will take the opportunity to share some of the issues that we have considered and to reassure the House that the Committee has started, and will continue, to support and scrutinise the Minister and Department in dealing with these issues. At a recent strategic meeting on 25 April, we were reminded in a RaISE briefing that the issue of environmental governance under the independent environmental protection agency (IEPA) has been discussed for over a decade. More recently, the Committee is aware that, in March 2024, the new AERA Minister stated that he was considering best options for environmental governance, including the benefits and costs of an IEPA.

On 22 February, Minister Muir briefed the Committee on his key challenges. It came as no surprise that among them were advancing an action plan to address the cause of algal bloom in Lough Neagh, the draft climate action plan and the environmental improvement plan. At that meeting, the Committee acknowledged that the problems in Lough Neagh were long-standing. We requested that the Minister start to look for some short- to medium-term solutions that might start to make a difference. In addition, the Committee highlighted the fact that the environmental improvement plan should be an urgent priority along with the climate action plans and that an increased focus on scientific solutions going forward and the work of AFBI and other research projects will be important. In fact, we highlighted to the Minister the fact that the soil sampling programme is a good example of the science at work. The Committee is also keen to consider the potential of anaerobic digesters for slurry management, and we plan to see those in action on a site visit soon.

On 21 March, the Committee had a briefing session with the Office for Environmental Protection, which was created by the Environment Act 2021 and is a body with a distinct role to play in holding government and other public authorities to account. Its work covers here and England, and the representatives expressed to the Committee their dedication to fulfilling that role in a meaningful way. The Committee looks forward to working with them. The OEP highlighted some of the priority work, including the environmental improvement plan and the blueprint for how the NI Government plan to protect and improve our environment. The Committee wishes to see a high-quality EIP published as soon as possible.

The OEP also highlighted to the Committee the range of missed deadlines for environmental legislation, and, like the OEP, the Committee wishes to see urgency in the delivery of those, including the nutrient action plan, river basin management plans, the nature recovery strategy and the Climate Change Act. On nutrient enrichment of aquatic and terrestrial habitats, the OEP advised that that is one of the biggest environmental issues here and that the situation that we are witnessing at Lough Neagh is symptomatic of a wider issue.

In a recent briefing from the Ulster Farmers' Union, its representatives highlighted to the Committee the fact that the UFU has a vision of a productive, profitable and progressive farming sector that can deliver for the environment, for the consumer and for the economy. The UFU

continues to work with DAERA on the Farming with Nature scheme, seeking a flexible agrienvironment scheme that pays farmers on the environmental results that they deliver as well as actions taken.

The Committee is mindful of the support that the agriculture sector will need, such as information and incentives, to be able to implement technologies to deal with environmental issues that the sector is keen to play its part in tackling. The Committee has concerns about the budget for the OEP, and, between them, DEFRA and DAERA must provide funding to enable the OEP to carry out its functions.

At our meeting on 21 March, we were briefed by Northern Ireland Environment Link. It highlighted to the Committee that it believes that the illegal dumping of waste at the Mobuoy site is a clear example of the failings of the current environmental enforcement, monitoring and regulatory system. In that body's view, it makes the case for the need for an independent environmental protection agency. The Committee accepts that there are many factors that contribute to the situation in Mobuoy, and we have also been briefed by PCI Consulting, which represents some of the affected residents and businesses. We will continue to engage with the Department to further explore the issue in the coming weeks. Like the Committee, NIEL is keen to see a climate action plan and the establishment of a just transition commission.

Having started to delve into these issues in the early months of the mandate, at our strategic meeting on 25 April, the Committee was keen to consider a balanced forward work plan across the remit of agriculture, environment and rural affairs. We were supported by our Assembly researchers, who provided a substantial briefing paper for that meeting and assisted us in exploring a range of issues, including those at Lough Neagh regarding the impacts from agriculture nutrients and animal and human sewage. That research briefing also noted the significant cross-cutting range of departmental responsibilities for Lough Neagh, including responsibilities for DAERA, DFC, DFI and DFE. The Committee will seek to support and assist the Minister as he produces a plan to tackle blue-green algae with evidence-based recommendations and to secure long-term water quality improvements.

At our planning meeting, the Committee also discussed —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up, Declan.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. [*Translation: Thank you.*] I look forward to the Minister's statement tomorrow, which might shed some light on some of the plans going forward.

Mr T Buchanan: Northern Ireland has one of the most beautiful natural environments. Lough Neagh forms part of that and is the envy of many other countries around the world. Therefore, we must endeavour to do all that we can to ensure that that natural environment and habitat is protected.

It is also welcome that, according to the environmental performance index, which is monitored by the universities at Yale and Columbia, the United Kingdom is ranked second in the world for environmental protection, with Denmark being the only country to have greater environmental protection levels. It is important to bear that in mind when we hear a call going out for an independent environmental protection agency. However, we simply cannot rest on those reports, and we must continue to strive for greater environmental improvements.

We were all witness to the blue-green algae bloom last summer, which not only affected Lough Neagh but travelled along the lower Bann to the north coast, affecting our beaches at Portstewart, Castlerock, Benone and Portrush. Action must be taken on this environmental problem and effective and efficient solutions found to resolve it. As stated, the blue-green algae affects not only Lough Neagh but many other places across Northern Ireland. In tackling the issue, it is essential to look at the root of the problem. The motion refers to the:

"agricultural run-off, the durability of the waste water infrastructure, the impact of invasive species and the catalyst of higher temperatures".

The pollution was linked to Northern Ireland Water's operations, which, while having responsibility for maintaining water quality, was responsible for 24% of pollution into the lough. The lough provides 40% of Northern Ireland's drinking water. It is also a startling revelation that, over the past 10 years, NI Water has released an average of 70 million tons of sewage into our local rivers and lakes. That equates to 7 million tons per year. That bears repeating: NI Water is putting 7 million tons of pollution per year into our waterways. Surely, urgent action must be taken by NI Water, which is under the remit of the Minister for Infrastructure, to curb the colossal amount of pollution that it is distributing into our

waterways. While the farming industry has taken measures — they continue to be put in place — to curb run-off from its farmers' land to help improve the environment, it is disappointing and unacceptable that NI Water has shown little sign of action to curb the pollution that comes from its quarters.

The motion also calls for:

"legislation to establish an independent environmental protection agency by the end of this Assembly mandate."

I have to question what that agency is going to do over and above what is done by the Office for Environmental Protection, which is already in existence. Would it be another layer of bureaucracy that is not required? The Minister would be better placed to review the effectiveness of the current structures and operation of the Office for Environmental Protection and the role that it plays in Northern Ireland than to establish another agency that may be neither necessary nor appropriate. The Member who moved the amendment outlined a number of environmental agencies that are already in place. What would another one do, over and above what is already being done? A bit of work needs to be done prior to the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency.

Mr Donnelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr T Buchanan: Yes.

Mr Donnelly: I want to go back to something that the Member said. He said that the UK is second in the world in environmental protection, but Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK that does not have an independent environmental protection agency. Does the Member think that there is any connection there?

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

Mr T Buchanan: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. We can look at the status of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom, which ranks second in the environmental performance index. That is to be welcomed. We can be proud of that, and it raises the question about why another agency is required. Of course, we are not saying that an agency should not be brought in at some stage, but lot of work needs to be done on why it might be required and on the role that it is going to play over and above that of all the other agencies that are in place

and the work that they do. That is why I cannot support the motion, but we can support the amendment.

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

Mr McMurray: Yes, this is my maiden speech, so I might go off topic. My grandparents lived in Massey Park, which is just round the corner from here. As a child in the '80s, I remember sledging here on a classically snowy winter's day and asking my father what went on in this grand and imposing Building. I was told, "Not much". Even without having any concept of the context of why not much went on, that felt to me, a child who was already in awe of these surroundings, to be an awful shame.

4.30 pm

I was a child of the Troubles, a teenager of the peace process, a young adult during devolution and a parent during power-sharing — or not sharing, as the case has been on occasion. Stormont's timeline has mirrored my own by way of seminal chapters. To say that it is both humbling and an honour to be here is an understatement. I hope I can contribute to the institution in ways that will benefit my constituents of South Down and everyone in our society because it is in the shelter of each other that the people live.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Patrick Brown, for all the work that he has done. I thank my constituency and party colleagues for entrusting me to perform this role and everyone who sent a message of congratulations or offered a prayer. Finally, I thank my wife, children, parents and wider family for their support and love at this time.

To the motion at hand: my former career was as an outdoor pursuits instructor. That stemmed from my passion for activities in the outdoor environment: surfing, climbing and mountain biking. Kayaking on rivers was my gateway into that lifestyle. As Ratty said to Mole:

"Believe me, my young friend, there is NOTHING—absolutely nothing—half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats."

I have been lucky enough to travel the world to mess about on many a river in a boat. While it is true that there is nowhere like home, in the

case of our rivers, that is usually in the form of an effluent smell. There has been a demonstrable deterioration in the water quality of our rivers over the past 10 years. Our rivers, lakes and river estuaries cannot even be deemed to be of "Good" overall status; they are merely "Moderate". That marks a deterioration and is proof that we are failing to protect them and the habitats that they provide. All that is extremely concerning and indicative of the ecological breakdown that we face. We are simply not making any inroads on the issue. When we compare ourselves with our nearest neighbours, we see that improving the status of our rivers is possible. Fifty per cent of rivers in the Republic are of "Good" or "High" ecological health. It is worth noting that they have an Environmental Protection Agency that is independent from the Government.

It was a love for the outdoors that led me to set down my roots in Castlewella in South Down. It has a superb coastline consisting of strands, rocky shores and tidal loughs, and areas of ancient woodland and open hillside, from rolling drumlins to crags on high hills — all areas that I have taken great pleasure and satisfaction in exploring, but all areas where habitats are under threat. The fire on the slopes of Slieve Donard in April 2021 was the starkest of those events, but the truth is that habitat loss was going on before that and will continue unabated without cross-departmental action and legislative support from the Assembly.

We need to be cognisant that there is no silver bullet that will reverse the habitat loss. Our upland environment has seen upwards of a 300% to 400% increase in the number of users accessing the hills, especially during COVID. While it is great to see people getting outside, the impact that we have on our uplands is drastic. Quite simply, other jurisdictions have more levers to pull and more resources to invest in their wild spaces than we do in Northern Ireland. It is not just one Department's role to reverse the stresses that the natural environment is suffering. The problem has been decades in the making and has not been helped by the stop-start nature of this institution. Our natural environment needs support and time to heal.

I want to finish by referring to schemes that have proved that biodiversity can be protected and, with some help, can be successful and thrive. The Mourne Heritage Trust has piloted healthy heathlands in which natural materials have been used to re-profile peat hags so that they retain water and sediment, preventing them from washing out. There are the National Trust's DAERA-funded wildlife recovery projects

and path building on the side of Slieve Donard. Landowners in South Down have seen the benefit of tree planting on small parcels of land and on whole hillsides, all of which increase an area's biodiversity. The RSPB's red kite scheme has seen the introduction of that majestic bird to South Down. Indeed, the red squirrel has seen its numbers increase due to conservation schemes. Those successes are noteworthy, but there is no consistent approach or, indeed, funding for them here compared with other parts of the UK. They are, admittedly, piecemeal due to the time-limited nature of their funding. Therefore, while the motion's call for an independent environmental protection agency is welcome, if we are serious about our environmental and biodiversity status and are ever to improve it in the long term, a truly cross-cutting and integrated approach from the Assembly is required.

Ms Mulholland: The motion will resonate deeply not only with me but with all those who cherish the beauty and ecological significance of Lough Neagh; those who live, work and have built their communities on its shores. As I have said before in the Chamber, although I now represent North Antrim, until last year, when I swapped my view of Ram's Island for Rathlin Island, my connection to the lough was through generations of my father's family, who lived by and worked on the lough. My father made his living fishing for eels. Not many are able to say that any more, more's the pity.

Lough Neagh, as we know, is the largest freshwater lake in these islands, but it is not merely a body of water. It is a lifeline for biodiversity, tourism, recreation, fishing and culture. Its significance simply cannot be overstated, not least because it provides over 40% of Northern Ireland's drinking water and serves as a sanctuary for countless species of flora and fauna. Yet, despite its importance, we face yet another summer of ecological and biodiversity crisis. The truth is, as has been said before, that this did not happen on a whim. It has been decades in the making, and it will take decades and concentrated commitment and investment to control. High concentrations of phosphates and nitrates from agricultural run-off; the inadequacies of our waste water infrastructure; the relentless growth of invasive species; and the looming spectre of climate change-induced higher temperatures are all factors that have conspired to push Lough Neagh to the brink. We knew that it would not be fixed overnight, and we are on the brink of another summer of a blighted lough.

There are solutions and actions that we can focus on, but they must involve many

stakeholders. The motion underscores our collective commitment to address the management of Lough Neagh. Central to those efforts has to be a fully independent environmental protection agency, something that, as my party colleague John Blair mentioned, we have been calling for for many years to ensure comprehensive, independent oversight of Northern Ireland's environmental performance. Such an agency must be given the authority and autonomy to enforce environmental laws, rather than adding to money-wasting layers of bureaucracy, as a Member who spoke previously indicated. In fact, we believe that it will serve as a foundation against the further degradation of our precious natural resources.

Since Brexit, Northern Ireland has been without the oversight of the European Commission. The Office for Environmental Protection was established in November 2021 to act as an oversight body across England and Northern Ireland. In response to the Member across the Chamber who was concerned about what difference an independent EPA would make, the biggest thing is that the Office for Environmental Protection did not replace all of the functions that the European Commission held, the most important being the power to levy fines. We have to do all that we can to sanction those who repeatedly pollute our lough. Increasing fines and imposing harsher sanctions and penalties for repeat polluters sends a message that environmental transgressions simply will not be tolerated. We know that investing in waste water infrastructure is paramount, as is supporting nature-friendly farming practices that prioritise sustainability and biodiversity conservation.

For me and for my party, perhaps most crucial of all is the imperative to foster cooperation amongst all stakeholders. As my colleague John Blair referenced, it is about getting out of the silos, transcending departmental boundaries and embracing a holistic approach to the protection and preservation of Lough Neagh. By creating a legislative duty to cooperate, we can forge a path forward that honours our collective responsibility to safeguard that invaluable asset for generations to come. We want to see the multifaceted environmental improvement plan on which my colleague Minister Muir has been seeking Executive agreement since March. That plan could be used to address a wide range of environmental criteria, many of which could be directly relevant to the situation in Lough Neagh. I hope that, following the motion today, that will come through as a matter of urgency with full Executive approval. We know that we

need fewer dust-gathering strategies and more cooperative action, and, in the Chamber, Members on all Benches have expressed their concern about the biodiversity crisis, although some continue to disagree on some of the actions needed to make positive change.

Whilst I am not enough of a Pollyanna to believe that we will return to a time when hundreds of fishing boats will leave quays all along the shore at 4.00 am every day from 1 May, I hope that we can put in place a multilayered plan that will see the lough return to its delicate balance in the decades to come.

Ms Hunter: At the heart of Ulster lies Lough Neagh, the banks of which grace five counties. With Ireland's largest lake come a rich mythological, stunning natural beauty, a body of water that once supported a vibrant ecosystem and a legacy of fishing and work life that has tied generations of families together. Today, however, much of Lough Neagh sits covered in algae, polluted and stagnant, similar to and symbolic of the stagnation that has characterised the failings of this Chamber for far too long. What should be a rich, thriving, ecological haven at the heart of this place, a lough capable of supporting communities, livelihoods and a diverse and flourishing array of marine and bird life is, instead, a murky pool with dwindling fish stocks, 100,000 fewer wintering birds and water so polluted that pet dogs have, sadly, died as a result. What should be recognised as a shared ecological jewel, a lake cherished and celebrated, is now devastated and has, instead, been neglected by the House, its purity sullied by the actions of industry, and those who depended on it for environmental integrity are now jobless and bereft.

I want to mention two fantastic businesses in my constituency. Edge Watersports and the Cranagh Activity Centre were based on the River Bann. That fantastic centre provided the opportunity for so many to engage in water sports. It had disability access and was a thriving local family business. It started in 1996 and its owners — two wonderful people — hoped to pass it down to their children. Sadly, as a direct result of the presence of the algae, they were told, "People cannot go into the water. If they go into the water and get sick, it is essentially on you." When they reached out at that time, when the Assembly was down, there was no guidance whatever from Departments and no financial support. As a result, sadly, those two family-owned businesses collapsed and closed. It is important that we raise that today to show not only the environmental and ecological crisis that we face but the real-life

negative financial impact that the algae and the ruining of the lake have created for businesses around the River Bann as well in my constituency.

It is high time that the Chamber took action to protect Lough Neagh, to grapple with challenging decisions that must be made to truly prioritise our environment and to safeguard the source of 40% of our drinking water for generations to come. Regrettably, we have not been doing that. With regard to the largest wetlands on these islands, the Assembly has been found derelict in its duty.

Mr O'Toole: I thank my colleague for giving way. Does she agree that it is slightly surprising and really disappointing that some in the Chamber are trying almost to downplay or deflect the seriousness of the crisis that we face and prolong it by calling for more reviews? We have two things: a crisis in one of the biggest freshwater lakes in Europe and one of the biggest environmental crimes in Europe at Mobuoy. The idea that we do not now need serious environmental enforcement is, frankly, unthinkable.

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

Ms Hunter: I thank the Member for his intervention. We have a moral and professional duty to protect the environment for not only ourselves and our generation but for our children and their children. Today is an opportunity to have that discussion about what we can do and what steps we can take.

With only a pitiful 14% of our rivers and lakes having received a "Good" ecological status in 2021, our rivers and lakes remain blighted by run-off from agriculture, animal slurry, chemical fertilisers and human sewage. While our environment continues to suffer, our wildlife diminishes in its numbers and quality, and the people dependent on the lake for their work continue to be shafted. The Earl of Shaftesbury, much like an absentee landlord of the 19th century, continues to collect royalties. It is high time that we took matters into our own hands, took seriously our responsibility to restore nature and its sacred importance and acted swiftly to fulfil what the SDLP has consistently called for and finally establish an independent environmental watchdog.

Minister, I respect that you have been in this position for a few weeks. Hopefully, in the coming weeks, you will use your new position to find an answer and a resolution. That is why it

was so deeply regrettable that, when we had a recall motion, the Alliance Party did not sign it. In your winding-up speech, I would like to hear a little more about why that was.

Mr Muir: Will the Member take an intervention?

Ms Hunter: Yes.

Mr Muir: In a recall motion, the ability to take action on this was not there. It is in having restored institutions that we have the ability to debate the motions, have Ministers in post and progress legislation. That is what we wanted to achieve. I think it is what we all wanted to achieve.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Member for his intervention. At that time, civil servants needed to understand where the political sway was. The recall motion would have provided us with a solid and open opportunity to communicate our needs, fears and concerns about Lough Neagh. Just days previously, Alliance Party members on Belfast City Council supported a motion alongside the SDLP and the Greens. That is why it was so confusing. However, Minister, I wish you the best of luck, and I really hope that Members across the House will vote for the motion.

4.45 pm

Mr Carroll: Just today, environmental campaigners gathered outside the Building to demand immediate action to tackle the environmental crisis at Lough Neagh. They gathered because the crisis is urgent, because the loss of biodiversity is rapid and catastrophic and because the poisoning of our drinking water has continued unabated since the restoration of the Assembly. Anyone who has been awake during the past three months will remember the promises that the Executive parties made about addressing the crisis at Lough Neagh. Since February, the Executive website and the media have been awash with grand statements from Ministers, who have expressed their supposed willingness to deal with that environmental disaster. Unfortunately for the rest of us, glossy PR photos of Ministers wearing waterboots by the lough shore will not fix the problems. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister promised immediate action over Lough Neagh, and the AERA Minister promised urgent action as well. After all the pledges and alleged priorities, the Executive have failed to take the most basic of steps, and a paltry £1.6 million is the sum that they have pledged to deal with a dying lough.

On Thursday, the Save Lough Neagh campaign, of which I am part, met the AERA Minister to make some proposals that could save the lough, including establishing an independent EPA. I am not convinced that there is an urgent plan to save the lough. The Minister has previously spoken about needing years or decades to fix the lough. I am afraid that it does not have years or decades. It does not have the luxury of time, and neither do we. We are told that there is an environmental plan — it is probably sitting in some drawer — that will be brought before the Executive. I call for that plan to be brought forward urgently and for it to include a commitment to establishing an independent environmental protection agency. The fact that 12% of local species are being threatened with extinction and the fact that we are one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world cannot be separated from the crisis in Lough Neagh, nor can it be understood without reference to the fact that the North is the only place in these islands that does not have a separate and independent statutory nature conservation body.

The reason that we need an independent environmental protection agency is simple. It is that people do not trust Stormont to hold those who are poisoning Lough Neagh and elsewhere to account, and why should they? The parties that say today that they want to protect Lough Neagh are the same parties whose poisonous policies have led to its destruction. The DUP, Sinn Féin, Alliance, the UUP and the SDLP have all played their part. The Executive's Going for Growth initiative incentivised the creation of industrial, factory-style farms, which have been spilling their poison into waterways for over a decade. A lack of infrastructure for dealing with the waste was no obstacle to parties here signing off on that plan. An independent environmental protection agency is needed to deal with the polluters, which had their fines reduced by the then DUP AERA Minister Edwin Poots. There is also a certain irony to the fact that the SDLP is taking up the case to demand an independent EPA. It was its Infrastructure Minister, Nichola Mallon, who granted licences for the destructive sand dredging that is stirring up the nutrients in Lough Neagh, choking its flora and fauna and fuelling the toxic algae growth.

That said, the responsibility is on the new Executive to address the Lough Neagh crisis. They continue to let pig farmers and other industrial giants spill their poisonous dung into Lough Neagh and its tributaries. It might be said that a similar whiff of manure emanates from the Executive, given all the broken promises and excuses. The Tory Exchequer cannot be

allowed to dictate whether Lough Neagh lives or dies. The Executive cannot strike a balance between our drinking water and their conservative economic agenda. Saving Lough Neagh requires urgent action and funding, and the AERA Minister should start by establishing an independent EPA that is free from ministerial interference, sufficiently funded and staffed —

Mr K Buchanan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will give way, yes.

Mr K Buchanan: The Member referred to pig farmers spewing their slurry into rivers. How many reports have you made to the NIEA about that?

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

Mr Carroll: I did not hear the Member's question. I am happy to give way again.

Mr K Buchanan: In your remarks, you made the point that pig farmers are putting slurry into rivers that run into Lough Neagh. Will you confirm to the House how many reports you have made to the NIEA about that?

Mr Carroll: I could ask the Member the same question. I imagine that, at his end, it is probably zero, but I am happy to be corrected.

I will continue with my points. The Minister should be sufficiently funding and staffing an independent EPA. It should have inspection and enforcement powers, be responsible for both land and sea and have the authority to bring prosecutions, where appropriate. Those are the demands. That is what the public and Lough Neagh deserve. We also deserve to take the lough back into public ownership, end commercial dredging and have a proper research and recovery plan enacted with urgent effect. Frankly, if they were left to their own devices, I do not believe that the Executive would be capable of or willing to do any of that. It will be the environmentalists, the swimmers, the fisherfolk, the surfers and the workers who take up the fight to save Lough Neagh. They will be key to protecting our environment and putting an end to the system that allows a wealthy minority to profit from its destruction. I stand with all those people every step of the way.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural

Affairs to respond to the debate. Minister, you have 15 minutes.

Mr Muir: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, and thanks to all those who contributed to the debate. I have quite a lot to cover in the response, so the number of interventions that I will be able to take is limited, but it is important that I respond in detail.

The motion, essentially, has three specific components: first, a call to declare an ecological and biodiversity crisis; secondly, a call to acknowledge the complexity of the issues facing Lough Neagh; and, finally, a call to commit to bringing forward the relevant legislation to create an independent environmental protection agency before the end of the current mandate.

I recall that, more than three years ago, on 3 February 2020 — a date that I fondly remember as the day that I gave my maiden speech to the House — the Assembly agreed a similar motion, albeit with a focus on the declaration of a climate emergency. Since that motion on 3 February 2020, we have seen the passing of two incredibly important pieces of environmental legislation: the Environment Act 2021, passed at Westminster, and the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, passed by this House. It will come as no surprise to anyone who knows me that I support the motion and agree that appropriate action is needed to address the acute and chronic issues facing the environment, not only in Northern Ireland but across these islands and, more generally, globally.

We clearly have an ecological and biodiversity crisis, and it is only through sustained action that we can begin to address all the issues that contribute to it. Those issues are many: climate change, biodiversity loss, water quality, degradation of peatland, air quality and single-use plastics, to name just a few. Properly addressing those issues will require political will, a strategic approach and significant investment — investment that I believe the environment and the people of Northern Ireland clearly deserve. Whilst my remit and that of the Assembly is restricted to Northern Ireland, we must remember that our actions or inactions contribute to wider issues created by the climate and the environmental emergencies facing our planet.

I am Minister with responsibility for the environment. That is a responsibility that I take very seriously, but addressing the environmental issues that affect Northern Ireland does not come down to the actions of

just one Minister or Department. It is for all of us collectively, as an Assembly and Executive, to take the necessary actions to deliver the strategic environmental outcomes that my draft environmental improvement plan will seek to achieve. I continue to work with Executive colleagues to finalise and agree the environmental improvement plan, which will be Northern Ireland's first environmental strategy. The six strategic environmental outcomes of the strategy are:

- "• Excellent air, water, land and neighbourhood quality*
- Healthy & accessible environment & landscapes everyone can connect with & enjoy*
- Thriving, resilient & connected nature and wildlife*
- Sustainable production & consumption on land and at sea*
- Zero waste & highly developed circular economy*
- Net zero greenhouse gas emissions & improved climate resilience and adaptability".*

Once the environmental strategy has been approved by the Executive, it is my intention to adopt it as soon as is practicable as Northern Ireland's first environmental improvement plan, thereby satisfying a statutory obligation of the Environment Act. Satisfying that statutory duty is important as a matter of law, but even more important is the potential to improve our environment before it is too late.

The motion highlights the issues with the state of Lough Neagh. It would not be an exaggeration to state that Lough Neagh is the single highest profile environmental issue for the public in Northern Ireland. It is an extraordinarily complex issue that has been many years in the making and that will take many years to solve. There is no single cause but a combination of issues that have conspired to create a perfect storm. Those include climate change, invasive species, agricultural run-off and waste water discharge. My officials are fully focused on developing a report with recommendations for short-, medium- and long-term measures to address the fundamental issues that created the images that we have all seen in the media over the past number of years, months, weeks and days. That report should be finalised shortly and will support the actions that are relevant to improving water quality across Northern Ireland as part of the environmental improvement plan.

There is no getting away from the fact that addressing the issues that affect Lough Neagh

will require significant short-term and long-term investment. Whilst the Budget settlement was disappointing, I am now working with officials on how we can reprioritise funding into environmental protection. That will, however, mean that stuff cannot be done or rolled out, and other matters will have to be scaled back, such as the tough financial settlement within which I have to work.

Turning to environmental governance, it is important to realise that that is about more than the creation of an independent environmental protection agency. As a long-time advocate of an independent agency in Northern Ireland, I am most certainly not diminishing the importance of establishing such a body, but good environmental governance is about more than a single issue. To me, good environmental governance means taking a strategic, whole-system approach. That will not only make our overarching approach better; it will make an independent environmental protection agency more fit for purpose and more effective. To that end, one of my first actions when I became AERA Minister was to ask officials to provide me with a scoping paper on strengthening environmental governance in Northern Ireland. That work is now done, and I am considering that paper and discussing next steps with my officials. I will announce those steps in due course.

I believe that there are many benefits associated with the establishment of an independent agency, and I am not the only one who says that. Environmental stakeholders and, indeed, many members of the public have made clear their desire for an independent agency. For example, the responses to a discussion document, which was published by a previous Environment Minister in 2015, indicated that only 6% of respondents did not support an independent agency in some form. Nevertheless, it is important that we consider properly what that independent agency might look like, what its roles and responsibilities should be and how it should be funded. Of course, we also have to consider the changes in environmental governance that have taken place recently and further changes that are on their way.

It may not be as simple as, for example, just making the current Northern Ireland Environment Agency an independent body, although, of course, that will be an option. I have looked at NIEA's counterpart organisations across these islands, all of which have a degree of independence from government. No two are exactly the same, whether in remit, degree of independence or

resources, and none is as successful as others would like to be.

We also have the Office for Environmental Protection, the role of which, sadly, is not well understood by many. The OEP was established as an independent environmental oversight body under the Environment Act 2021, to close the environmental governance gap that was created by the UK leaving the EU. I do not believe that that gap has been entirely closed, just to be correct. The OEP performs the extremely important role of holding public authorities to account for the proper implementation of environmental law in Northern Ireland. Its role is a vital component of the environmental governance landscape in the post-Brexit era, but that role is almost completely separate from the NIEA's. It is not a replacement for the NIEA, nor can it ever be.

I remain committed to strengthening environmental governance administratively and through the introduction of new legislation where that is necessary, following full engagement and consultation. I look forward to the support of my Executive colleagues and the official Opposition as I seek to address the mistakes of the past and create a brighter environmental future for Northern Ireland.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Robbie Butler is going to make the winding-up speech on the amendment. You have five minutes.

Mr Butler: Before I start, I welcome Andrew McMurray, who made his maiden speech today. Andrew, I was going to say that you have big boots to fill, but you have big, long legs to follow in former MLA Paddy Brown, so I wish you good luck, and I enjoyed your speech.

Forgive me for not including more contributions, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Declan McAleer spoke too fast for me to write anything down, but I know that he made really good points. I thought that I spoke fast: my goodness, they are even better west of the Bann.

Members, an opportunity lies before us not just to address the immediate crisis at hand but to enact systemic changes that could fortify our environmental governance for years to come. I am advocating for the amendment, which was moved by my colleague Tom Elliott. I welcome the Minister's response and recognise what he has done, but the adoption of our amendment will offer a level of scrutiny to the Chamber as to what the review that he has carried out will amount to and of where the powers will reside in those agencies that have been reviewed.

5.00 pm

Contrary to what was in some Members' comments, we see the value of and need for an independent environmental protection agency. However, we simply seek to ensure that, in the scrutiny, construction and delivery of such a body, it is clearly focused and resourced, has the requisite support and powers and that that is well known across the gamut of stakeholders that will be involved.

Mr Patsy McGlone moved the motion, and it was certainly worthy of debate. As he accurately orated, we have debated the motion many times over many years. Whilst the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency would be a commendable step, we must acknowledge that it alone may not suffice in tackling the multifaceted challenges posed by the ecological and biodiversity crisis in which we find ourselves. We need to take a holistic approach, one that scrutinises our existing governance structures, identifies their shortcomings and explores avenues for improvement. We all need to be involved in that, however; it should not be just within a single Department's purview. The environment belongs to us all, and, as the Minister pointed out, this is a cross-departmental exercise.

Linda Dillon spoke about being parochial. She is not here, but that was an excellent message. If every one of us in Northern Ireland were parochial about the environment, we could all play our part and could all make a difference. By incorporating a review of environmental governance into the motion, we signalled our commitment not only to address the symptoms but to diagnose the root causes of environmental degradation. Such a review would also allow us to assess the effectiveness of the current regularity, no, regulatory mechanisms — I have someone else's teeth in today — identify gaps in enforcement and explore best practice from other jurisdictions. A number of Members referred to that. Furthermore, it would provide an opportunity to engage stakeholders from other sectors and, importantly, to involve civil society organisations, the public, industry representatives and academic experts. Their insights and expertise —.

Mr Blair: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: I will, if you are brief.

Mr Blair: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I assure him that I ask this question to be

helpful. Does he understand my reservation, which is that calling for an environmental governance review — the Minister has already undertaken that and outlined it to the House — seems to be counterproductive and repetitive? That is an issue that I have with the amendment.

Mr Butler: I hope to give the Member confidence through my answer. It is a brief amendment, and the understanding of it was to try to be helpful. I am not saying that the review that has taken place was narrow, but I am speaking about a wider consultation process. We are talking about what would happen if we were legislating.

Mr Elliott: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: Absolutely. Do not take all my time.

Mr Elliott: It would have been helpful if the Minister had told us beforehand that he had undertaken a significant review, if it was significant.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for his intervention. I will get on here, guys.

The amendment is genuinely meant to be helpful. As I said to the Minister, the scope of the governance piece is inclusive of academic experts, the wider public and civil society. I will move on now.

Michelle McIlveen pointed out the need for funding and resources, which will be absolutely crucial if we are to see a marked difference. Moreover, by explicitly including the exploration of potential enhancements to our environmental governance, we demonstrate a willingness to innovate and adapt in the face of evolving challenges. That is key. It could involve considerations such as greater transparency and public participation, which is my main point, stronger regulatory enforcement mechanisms and enhanced coordination.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up, Robbie.

Mr Butler: Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Butler: Can I not get an extra minute? Oh, man.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: You do not get an extra minute when you are making a

winding-up speech. The Deputy Speaker would have known that. I am just saying.

Mr Butler: Oh, right.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mark Durkan to make a winding-up speech on the motion. Mark, you have 10 minutes.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. [*Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.*] I thank the Minister and Members for their contributions. I also congratulate Mr McMurray on making his maiden speech. Now that he is here, he can judge for himself whether much happens in here, but he will see that there is still a fair bit of sledging.

We have heard of the frightening, frankly apocalyptic, warning calls from our natural environment. The calls have been repeated and have gone unheeded for far too long. The formation of an independent, adequately resourced environmental protection agency has been a long-established policy position of the SDLP, and it is deeply rooted in our values and environmental ethos. As stated, it was a commitment in NDNA, and, like many of those commitments, it has been neither delivered nor advanced. The SDLP, on the other hand, has engaged with the environmental sector NGOs to draft and develop strong ecological and biodiversity targets and is considering a private Member's Bill to strengthen nature preservation and recovery.

A decade ago, as Environment Minister, I consulted on and attempted to progress proposals for an independent EPA but was unable to garner the required political support to get it through the Executive. At that time, I worked closely with the environmental NGOs, and I vividly and fondly remember the contribution of Jennifer Fulton, CEO of Ulster Wildlife. Sadly, as we heard, Jennifer passed away just last week. Our thoughts are with Norman and Jennifer's family and friends. It is important that we not just record our sympathy and sadness at her passing but strive to achieve the environmental improvements that she did so much to drive forward with rousing passion, realistic pragmatism and remarkable patience. She was a real force of nature and force for nature.

Collectively, our generation has taken the natural environment for granted, but the reality of its decline is becoming more apparent: from the butterflies, once a constant symbol of summer days but now on the edge of extinction,

to the resigned acceptance of yearly flood damage. We are on the precipice of an ecological crisis, and Lough Neagh is the apex of that crisis. Its glowing green algae is visible and tangible proof of climate and biodiversity breakdown. The disaster has put Northern Ireland on the world stage for all the wrong reasons, but, rather than that serving as the clarion call it should have been, we had no Executive in place to act. That was despite pleas and attempts from an SDLP Opposition for political leaders to set aside political differences and work together in the interests of people and the environment.

In today's debate, Tom Elliott pondered whether Waterways Ireland could or should take a role in Lough Neagh, while cautioning against the creation of an independent EPA on the grounds that it might be something else to pay for. The Northern Ireland Executive currently funds up to 15%, I think, of Waterways Ireland. If Lough Neagh were to be included in its portfolio, our contribution would increase by multi millions of pounds every year.

The health of biodiversity and natural habitats across the North is in rapid decline. As has been highlighted, the North is one of the most nature-depleted areas in the world, and the water quality in our rivers and lakes is deteriorating. A legacy of chronic underfunding, inaction and failing infrastructure has taken a huge toll and poses serious environmental and public health risks. NI Water admits that overspill into the natural environment is a daily reality due to the insufficient capacity of waste water infrastructure. Miss McIlveen correctly pointed out the further failings of NI Water but neglected to say what steps she took to address those failings when she was the responsible Minister.

Biodiversity, people and businesses are living out the once-forewarned consequences of climate disaster. Just yesterday, we saw the devastation wrought by increased incidences of flash flooding. Sadly, it is a trend that will inevitably continue as the climate crisis deepens. Tackling the crisis before us requires a robust environmental governance framework, one that can work hand in hand with current structures like the OEP. The establishment of an independent EPA for Northern Ireland is a promise to the future. A body free from political interference is necessary to ensure that decisions are made on the basis of science and not short-term interests. It would ensure that environmental regulations are based on and enforced in the best interests of both public health and environmental protection.

Mr McNulty: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: I am sorry. I will not have time to do so.

On the staffing of such an EPA, it is important to reiterate that the motion is not an attack on or even a questioning or criticism of the highly qualified and committed NIEA workforce; if anything, it is about freeing them from the constraints of conflicting government policies and objectives. As we have heard, Friends of the Earth has said that any new agency should be well funded and well staffed, which begs this question: is the NIEA either of those things? Miss McIlveen said that we cannot set up another agency just to satisfy idealists. I will join Mrs Dillon in quoting Oscar Wilde:

"We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

Cross-border collaboration and coordination are vital and must be a requirement across all climate policy in recognition of our shared challenges. Linda Dillon spoke of the need for an all-island biodiversity plan. Yes, we should build on the success of the all-Ireland pollinator plan. Furthermore, we have seen the cost, ecologically and to the public purse, of environmental crime as a result of failures to properly address and enforce penalties against perpetrators, and nowhere has that been more evident than Mobuoy.

In order to safeguard our environment effectively, it is vital that any EPA has strong enforcement powers and the authority to bring prosecutions. The power to take immediate and decisive action on the issues will serve as a deterrent and uphold accountability in the protection of our natural resources. The glaring failures in that area to date are unequivocal proof that current structures just are not working.

We cannot afford a paper tiger approach to the ecological crisis. The inertia and delays of leadership have served to exacerbate the climate crisis. The urgency to deliver on the Executive commitment to establish an independent environmental protection agency cannot be overstated. Merely opting for a review rather than a concrete legislative commitment just does not cut it. We cannot afford added delays or half-hearted measures. Before we know it, it will be "Next Decade, Same Old Approach". Therefore, it will come as no surprise that we cannot support today's amendment. The Executive must meet their obligation to legislate for an independent EPA

in the current mandate and ensure that its functions are underpinned by law.

I have a wee bit of time to turn to —.

Mr Muir: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Durkan: Certainly, Minister.

Mr Muir: Does the Member agree that none of us wants to set up something that will be ineffective or massively costly? We want to set up something that will do the job. That is the focus. Now that the scoping work on environmental governance has been done, it is right that we move to the next stage, which is looking at the way forward and potentially consulting on an independent environmental protection agency.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his intervention and, indeed, the action that he has taken and proposes to take on the issue. We can assure him of our full support as he does that.

I want to call out comments from Gerry Carroll. In his usual attack on everyone, he pointed to the regulation of sand dredging. I am sure that, after a century of completely unrestricted and unregulated activity, he will agree that the fact that hundreds of jobs can be supported by the regulation and restriction of both the area in which and the volume at which dredging can take place on the lough is no less ironic than the proudly anti-war PBP remaining silent on Ministry of Defence contracts at Harland and Wolff.

What we do or do not do now will have major implications for our immediate future and generations to come.

Mr Carroll: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Go.

Mr Carroll: I did not expect the Member to give way, but I am thankful that he did. I remind him that we submitted leaflets to workers at Harland and Wolff that stated that we are for workers' skills being used in the just transition to green energy and away from warfare. I do not think that the SDLP did that.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: That has nothing to do with the motion. Mark, you have 15 seconds.

Mr Durkan: We have a moral obligation to tackle environmental degradation head-on, mindful of our children and subsequent generations who will inherit the consequences of our actions and inaction. It is imperative that we confront the crisis before us and use every tool at our disposal to do so.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 28; Noes 41.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Beattie, Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Butler and Mr Nesbitt

NOES

Dr Archibald, Mr Baker, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dillon, Mr Donnelly, Mr Durkan, Ms Eastwood, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Mr Honeyford, Ms Hunter, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr McAleer, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McMurray, Mr McNulty, Mr McReynolds, Mrs Mason, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Á Murphy, Ms Nicholl, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Toole, Miss Reilly, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Durkan and Ms McLaughlin

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly declares an ecological and biodiversity crisis; acknowledges the complex characteristics of biodiversity and ecological breakdown in Lough Neagh, which includes high concentrations of phosphates and nitrates from agricultural run-off, the durability of the waste water infrastructure, the impact of invasive species and the catalyst of higher temperatures caused by the climate crisis;

notes the resolution of the Assembly to address management of the lough; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to address the ecological crisis by bringing forward legislation to establish an independent environmental protection agency by the end of this Assembly mandate.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, please take your ease for a moment.

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

5.30 pm

Assembly Business

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

Opposition Business

VAT for Hospitality

Ms McLaughlin: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the pressures facing hospitality and tourism businesses across Northern Ireland; notes the impact of additional rates bills on top of energy and other cost increases; further notes the impact of inflation caused by the chaotic fiscal interventions of successive Conservative Party Governments; notes the vital importance of tourism and hospitality businesses to local economic development; and calls on the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy to bring forward a package of costed interventions to support the sector, including options for the devolution of VAT for hospitality to fortify this important sector and create the conditions for jobs growth.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have five minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. As an amendment was selected and has been published on the Marshalled List, the Business Committee has agreed that eight minutes will be added to the total time for the debate.

Ms McLaughlin: The SDLP proposes the motion not only to advocate specific VAT and hospitality measures but to support our tourism and hospitality sectors more broadly. Our tourism sector is a critical driver for our economy, and there is no doubt that it is one of the biggest success stories of the peace process. Across this island, the tourism industry has gone from strength to strength in the past 26 years, and our part of the island is no exception. The industry is now worth more than £1 billion each year to the North and supports 330,000 jobs across this island — from the

walls of Derry, steeped in history and recently immortalised by the comedy of Lisa McGee, to the wooded forests that captured imaginations in 'Game of Thrones' — in thousands of attractions, businesses and establishments across our counties.

Tourism is one of the major selling points of this region and an industry that we should shout about from our rooftops at every chance we get. The industry has driven higher employment and economic productivity and better health and life outcomes for so many people. It has helped to change our reputation at home and around the world as somewhere to come, stay, work and visit. The same could be said of our hospitality industry, which plays a huge role in supporting the economy each and every day. Hospitality establishments and workers represent the lifeblood of a thriving economy, generating and driving wealth in each of our cities and towns.

We know, of course, that things have been enormously difficult for both sectors over the past few years, with the impact of COVID being particularly acutely felt by businesses that rely on a steady stream of visitors and punters. As has been said many times, the inflation crisis was about not just the cost of living but the cost of doing business. The past few years have been extremely difficult for the tourism and hospitality sectors. Optimism about their prospects fell to just 13% in January of this year, and, although levels have recovered since, huge challenges remain.

The impact of the pandemic, twinned with the uncertainty of Brexit, and the inflation crisis have created a perfect storm for businesses. Costs are simply out of control, and they have forced many of our businesses to shut their doors for good. Many areas of those industries are crying out for the relevant skills, and the Department really needs to step up to the mark and develop a pipeline for those businesses.

Now that the institutions have finally been restored, we need to do better by the private sector so that it continues to be the major driver for our economy, as it is today. That includes using every lever that is at our disposal and advocating for those that need to be devolved in order to maximise the benefit of tourism and hospitality and to grow the industries.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: No, I am sorry; I have a lot to get through. I thought that I had 10 minutes.

No single measure will work in isolation, and we need to see a strategic approach through a new

tourism strategy and action plan. That strategy must contain the investment that we need to see in those industries, and it must also commit to having concrete measures and targets for expanding our all-island offering, including a defined timeline on the extension, at long last, of the Wild Atlantic Way into the North, which our party has been advocating for many years. It also must recognise the reality across the island. Some 70% of our international visitors to Northern Ireland arrive via Dublin, and 72% of our tourism revenue in Northern Ireland comes from our out-of-state visitors. That is why it is so important that, when considering interventions to support the tourism and hospitality sector, we look at things in the all-island context within which we exist.

The tourism industry has also been crystal clear about making its pleas to the Government regarding the electronic travel authorisation (ETA). That is not only unworkable but unacceptable, and the Government need to listen to industry to find a solution in order to finally negate the impacts of the scheme.

We need a funded and regionally balanced strategy and action plan that can bring together all the interventions to be published without delay. We also need to look very closely at VAT — I am never going to get through all this.

The Republic of Ireland's tourism and hospitality market is eight times the size of Northern Ireland's, even though its population is just three times the size. That is no accident. It has been the intentional policy of the Republic of Ireland to put in place measures that boost hospitality and seize the enormous potential of the island, including through VAT. The huge differential in the VAT charge creates an imbalance North and South. Oxford Economics has calculated that a 1% reduction in VAT has equated to a 1.2% increase in employment. My colleague Matthew O'Toole will take that point further as we go through the debate.

Mr Tennyson: I beg to move the following amendment:

After "devolution of VAT for hospitality" insert:

"and an independent review of non-domestic rate reliefs"

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): You will have five minutes to propose the amendment and three minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have three minutes.

Mr Tennyson: The hospitality sector is a vital part of our economy. Hospitality UK estimates that our local hospitality sector employs 74,000 people and contributes in the region of £1.9 billion to our local economy, yet those businesses are at the thin edge of an economic wedge that is not of their making. Having weathered the COVID-19 pandemic, they now face labour shortages as a result of Brexit, and they are contending with the double-edged cost-of-living and cost-of-doing-business crisis, with customers cutting back on discretionary spend whilst high energy costs simultaneously eat away at their bottom line.

The pandemic, however, proved not only the resilience and agility of our pubs, restaurants and accommodation businesses but the ability of government to act quickly in the face of crisis through temporary cuts to VAT and the roll-out of Eat Out to Help Out. Internationally, it is important to note that VAT on accommodation is lower in countries such as Austria and Belgium than it is in the UK, and, for restaurants, it is lower in places like Croatia and Italy. Therefore, there is an argument that, in many instances, the UK is taxing those sectors more than is the case in comparable European countries.

As a member of the Finance Committee, I am acutely aware of the constraints that are on budgets right across the public sector. I am, however, in favour of additional support, because I recognise that the cost to the public purse of losing otherwise sustainable and viable businesses will far outweigh the cost of upfront intervention. It is important, however, to note that there is a live debate about what that support looks like and what the best approach is.

I note that the motion calls for "the devolution of VAT" powers to the Executive in order to achieve its aim. As someone who is in favour of greater fiscal devolution and fiscal autonomy for this place, I have no principled objection to that aspiration. Practically, however, we may need to be cognisant of a number of factors. The Fiscal Commission highlighted the potential complexity of the devolution of VAT, meaning that any process of devolution would likely be time-consuming.

That is time that these businesses do not have. As such, it would be preferable for the UK Government to take action in the first instance; indeed, the Alliance Party has called on them to do so.

Making the case for increased fiscal devolution will require the reform of these institutions to

ensure that they are stable, but it will also require evidence that the Executive are using the powers already at their disposal well. In that context, we cannot ignore the other policy levers available to us, including the vital role of rates, over which the Executive already have direct control. That is what our amendment seeks to achieve in calling for an independent and holistic review of the non-domestic rate relief system. An independent review is a crucial first step in ensuring that our rating system is progressive and fair and supports economic growth, as well as being aligned with the Executive's economic priorities. It is key to examining inequalities in the rating system, such as the situation in which relatively small businesses, like the No. 7 cafe in my constituency, face enormous bills. No. 7 faced an eye-watering £70,000 rates bill whilst larger online businesses pay proportionally less. The Finance Minister has said in the Chamber that the rating system has been reviewed numerous times, but such examples are evidence that those reviews have clearly not been adequate. I remain entirely unconvinced that previous reviews enjoyed the levels of independence or breadth of scope necessary to bring about much-needed change. Many of the reviews also predate the pandemic, which has fundamentally reshaped the economic environment, and the reformation of the Executive, when the Economy Minister set out a renewed economic vision.

Ultimately, a comprehensive, holistic and independent review of rates — a review that is inclusive of businesses, trade unions, trade bodies, professionals, ratepayers and councils — is essential if we are to support our hospitality sector and move the economic climate in Northern Ireland forward. Therefore, I ask Members to support the amendment and the motion.

Mr McGuigan: As an MLA for North Antrim, I am acutely aware of how important tourism and the tourism and hospitality sector are to the economy and life of my constituents. It could be such attractions as the Giant's Causeway, the Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge, the Dark Hedges or the stunning coastal scenery or luscious glens of Antrim that bring visitors — in their tens of thousands — to north Antrim each year; or it might be a day trip to Rathlin Island, or the ability to play golf on a top course and stay in one of the luxurious hotels in Ballycastle or Ballymena; or it might even be an event such as this weekend's North West 200, which had thousands of fans travel through north Antrim and stop in Ballymoney to visit the shrines to Joey and Robert Dunlop. Whatever the reason for the visit, the hospitality and tourism sector in

places such as Ballycastle, Bushmills, Ballymena and Ballymoney and in many villages depends on the number of visitors that can be attracted, and that can be helped by good government policy and support.

Tourism across the North is a key economic driver, and one that is yet to be maximised. Our tourism sector is bouncing back in the aftermath of COVID, but I acknowledge that it is a sector that is facing many challenges, not least the impact of Brexit and the pandemic; rising costs in overheads such as energy and food prices; challenges with the recruitment and retention of staff; and the potential negative impact of the British Government's electronic travel authorisation policy, which is, undoubtedly, going to turn tour operators and tourists away from visiting the North. Unfortunately, we see many pubs, restaurants and cafes having to close or reduce their opening hours. The sector needs help and support.

I am delighted that Minister Murphy recognised that and stated that he is putting together a tourism implementation group to work on issues that will support tourism and hospitality. He also plans to create a tourism partnership board to help develop and oversee the implementation of an action plan to support the sector. He, and others, have called on the British Government to abandon their electronic travel authorisation policy, and he is considering the potential of setting up skills academies for the tourism sector. I wish Conor well and hope to see him back in the Chamber soon, after a speedy and full recovery, but I have no doubt that, in his absence, Minister Harghey will carry on that good work.

Sinn Féin and I support the call for the devolution of VAT for tourism. The Assembly should be granted the ability to tailor tax policy to suit the needs of people and sectors here. It makes sense that the VAT rates that are set are comparable with the economic conditions of this region. Sinn Féin, obviously, wants to see VAT rates harmonised across the island. We want to build a more inclusive and sustainable economy for all — an economy that supports small local businesses, promotes regional balance and creates high-quality jobs. We believe that the hospitality and tourism sector is a key element of that. Therefore, supporting it in whatever way we can is vital.

5.45 pm

Ms Forsythe: The DUP fully recognises the importance of the local hospitality sector, including its importance in realising Northern Ireland's tourism potential and boosting the

high-street economy. Hospitality is the fourth-largest private sector employer, with some 57,000 jobs in accommodation and food services alone. My party is committed to ensuring that businesses and employers have the tools and the right support to thrive and grow in what are challenging economic times. In particular, we believe that cutting tourism and hospitality VAT is crucial going forward. We have said consistently that the difference in hospitality VAT between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, in particular, is an impediment to creating a more competitive environment locally and to building on the sector's standing as an engine for growth and job creation. That is especially a concern in constituencies that are near the border, like my constituency of South Down.

Hospitality was one of the worst-affected sectors during COVID. DUP Ministers prioritised it as part of the Executive's economic recovery plan. Prior to the rate of VAT returning to 20% in March 2022 after the COVID response, the all-party parliamentary group for hospitality and tourism endorsed calls for a lower rate of VAT to be applicable across the United Kingdom. Following on from that and the group's recommendations, it is clearly not a question of whether we should act but how we should act to support that vital industry. In response, my party does not believe that the necessary capacity exists to devolve those additional fiscal powers at present. We do not support devolution of the additional fiscal powers for setting VAT here, but we recognise that the motion calls only for consideration of options to support the sector, which we do support. The motion does not state support for the devolution of VAT powers, so my party can support it.

Our view is based on a number of pragmatic considerations. The Fiscal Commission's report highlighted the:

"uncertainty regarding the significant additional compliance and administration burdens"

associated with devolving VAT to the Executive and Assembly. The commission did not recommend that course of action. It also pointed to the fact that an agreement to assign a proportion of VAT revenues to Scotland has been beset by years of delay because information on how revenues break down between regions is simply not available. If that is the evidence for reforms that do not grapple with the issue of powers or rates, what hope is there that the wholesale devolution of VAT to

Northern Ireland could take place in a timely way?

My party questions whether devolving those powers would bring timely benefits for affected firms. There are other actions that Ministers could take collectively to ease pressures and promote a more resilient and competitive landscape for the hospitality and tourism sector. My colleagues will take forward further points.

Mr Nesbitt: So, the Opposition want to cut taxes without telling us who will pay for it. Who knew, Deputy Speaker, who knew? I am sympathetic to the pressures that the sector is under. Hospitality Ulster often talks about having to explain why a pint of beer in a bar in the centre of Belfast costs the same as a pint in central London. It says that there are a number of reasons: Northern Ireland has the highest business rates; we have the highest energy costs in the UK; there is no relief on staffing costs, which are just the same; and so many of our pubs are small independents, meaning that they do not have the purchasing power of the big chains that have hundreds of pubs.

That said, I wonder whether the party opposite, the Opposition, will explain its reaction to the fact that the Northern Ireland Committee, Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC-ICTU) said that it is "the wrong policy"; a policy that, if it benefits any customers in any way, it will be those who are in the highest income bracket. I leave it open to the Member to respond.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving me the opportunity. He will note that the motion is careful. It does not say that we should definitely cut that tax. As an Opposition, we have been consistent, unlike the Executive parties, in providing costings. The motion says that we should look at whether devolving VAT for hospitality — not for everything — would help. I hope that that helps him.

Mr Nesbitt: That is terribly responsible. Thank you.

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

Mr Nesbitt: There is another 5% VAT rate that has applied, so there is an evidence base on this. In 2000, the Isle of Man got a derogation, endorsed by the European Union, to lower the VAT rate on the repair, maintenance and improvement of existing dwellings to 5% because of the crisis in the construction industry. Over the next 10 years, there were two formal reviews, in 2003 and 2008, of the

impact of that 5% rate on repair, maintenance and improvement. The benefits that were identified included stimulating the industry; retaining skills; creating new permanent jobs, including apprenticeships; offering citizens an affordable way to improve their dwelling when they could not afford to or were too scared to move; regenerating the existing housing stock; helping the Government achieve their target of reducing carbon emissions; and reducing the viability of the black or shadow market. Very few people were going to the black market, because they could afford to do otherwise. Also, there was an increase in business and an increase in the number of employees undertaking work that they would not have otherwise have done at that time. Customers were less inclined to request cash deals and were happier to look at small firms as a viable alternative to bigger ones. The reports estimate that, if it had been UK-wide, the lost revenue to the Treasury could have been between £102 million and £508 million. You will agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, that that is a lot of money, but, as a whole, there would have been an impetus to the economy generating £1.4 billion, more than double the lost revenue. Those are 2010 figures.

In conclusion, I like the amendment, which the party will be happy to support. If the amendment is carried, we will support the motion as amended.

Mr Frew: I echo what my colleague Diane Forsythe said. My constituency colleague from North Antrim walked you through how important tourism and hospitality is to North Antrim. You will excuse me, Mr Deputy Speaker and the House, if we who represent the constituency feel a bit more qualified to talk about our tourism offer in Northern Ireland. Also, our party has worked very well over the past four to five years in supporting businesses. Not only did we produce the high street voucher scheme, which did not just help consumers but actually helped businesses to get people through the door, but we advocated for the sensible opening of businesses when all the other parties here wanted to keep them closed or to close them. I have yet to see any justification for that.

This should not only be about hospitality and tourism. Our high-street offer takes in retail and services. There should be a collective here: a big picture. To drill down into the detail of what it means to reduce VAT for hospitality, what do the proposers of the motion actually mean? Is it on hotel admissions? Is it on entrance fees for cultural or tourism events? What does it actually mean, and what will it be applied on? It is no

secret, as Members will know, that I am not a great lover of more fiscal devolution in this part.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will give way.

Mr O'Toole: For information, the general definition that is used by Hospitality Ulster is that it applies to accommodation and food, so it would not apply to alcohol-only pubs, for example.

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

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for that. Of course, the leader of the Opposition has a bit of skin in this game because, in the previous mandate, he proposed changing the licensing requirements for pubs. That sent shock waves and horror through our industry at that time. I do not know where that proposal is now in the whole scheme of things for the Opposition. Maybe, being a responsible Opposition, it has dropped that altogether. I do not know.

These are very important issues. A tweak here and a twist there can have massive ramifications for our industry, and that is why I do not and will not support the devolution of VAT in Northern Ireland without it being done UK wholesale. The differential that it would create and the ramifications that it would have for our businesses, our tax base, the Barnett formula and everything else that would go with it would be enormous and could be catastrophic.

The amendment refers to a review of rate relief measures. What was a game changer during the time of lockdown philosophy was our ability to remove rates for businesses. That was an absolute godsend. Is the amendment therefore calling for a review of rate relief packages or a review of rates? We have had countless reviews of rates, and, of course, all that those reviews do is make one street more expensive than another. The base stays the same.

Even when we see text, when the detail is teased out, what does it mean? There is going to have to be a lot more work done before we can come to any concrete decisions on fiscal powers coming to the Assembly.

Ms Eastwood: I thank the Member who tabled the motion in order that we can have this conversation. I know that those who work in our hospitality and tourism industries are on their knees. What they will want to hear this evening is people in this Building giving them the

solutions and the tools that they need to help make their lives better.

Here is a synopsis of where we are at. This is the land of 100,000 welcomes: céad míle fáilte. We are people who love people. We sell stories. That is what this island is about. Can you imagine Timmy Mallett cycling around yet having nowhere to go? That, however, is the real prospect that we face if we do not listen to the people who are out there selling the stories, having the craic agus ceol [*Translation: crack and music*] and creating that experience for people who come to this island.

Many businesses that have had to close their doors in recent months were long-established, successful businesses. They had loyal customers, yet the costs for them were simply too much to bear. I am talking about places such as Clenaghans in Aghalee, in my and David's constituency of Lagan Valley, and, indeed, the Owl and Pussycat Café in Hillsborough. Importantly, the motion refers to the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Finance working together. That is exactly what we need: collaborative working. We have heard so much about no more working in silos. This is where the rubber hits the road, because we cannot look to support hospitality, tourism and skills in one Department. Collaboration really will be key.

As my colleagues outlined, businesses here are grappling with one of the highest VAT rates for hospitality in Western Europe and limited targeted rate relief. Businesses are looking across the water with envy at the support from which others have been able to benefit while they have not.

Our amendment notes specifically the need for:

"an independent review of non-domestic rate reliefs".

As I said, our hospitality businesses look at others with envy, but such a review is something that is in our power to undertake now. We simply have too much to lose if things carry on in the same way. Hospitality and tourism are crucial to the vibrancy of local areas and the wider economy. It is about place-making and place-shaping. We have a proud tradition on this island, and in Northern Ireland, of who we are and our localities. Someone mentioned parochialism. Sure, is that not what we have bottled and sold on the international stage? Fair play to us for doing so.

Many enter the sector, find their passion and create jobs and livelihoods for others. The

choice before us today is to get behind those people and put our shoulder to the wheel to help them. I sincerely hope that we all take the opportunity to listen to them. I thank the Member who tabled the motion and hope that others support our helpful amendment.

Mr Brett: I thank the leader of the Opposition for tabling the motion. If I had tabled this uncosted motion in my name, I wonder whether I would have ended up on another SDLP graphic condemning me for doing so. I note that, in its motion, the SDLP asks Ministers to bring forward a support package, and they will happily do the job of the Opposition for them once again.

This is my first opportunity to speak in the House since Minister Murphy temporarily stood aside. I associate myself and my party with the best wishes to him, and I pay tribute to Minister Hargey and wish her well in her new role. She will be missed on the Finance Committee. She is a formidable and capable politician. I am sure that she will do an excellent job in her new role.

6.00 pm

I now get to speak about two of my favourite subjects: North Belfast and pints. Most DUP people on the Back Benches probably have not spoken about the latter. As someone who is proud to have the Cathedral Quarter in their constituency, I see it as a prime example of how our hospitality, tourism and pub sector can be a game changer for our city and region. The Cathedral Quarter transformed that part of North Belfast, taking away dereliction and attracting five-star hotel accommodation. It has the Duke of York — other bars are available — and many other pubs and restaurants. The so-called Tribeca site sits right beside it, and that is an example of how our city and hospitality sector can be undermined if we do not support them. In part of our city, that blight has sat for years, and, to date, we have not been able to get to grips with changing it. Can you imagine how, if we continued to transform the city by supporting the hospitality sector, that part of the city could be attractive to so many new businesses?

We support the Alliance amendment. It brings forward a number of important points that we can look at. Previously, we have targeted rates relief successfully for non-domestic properties. The small business rate relief scheme is a huge support, as is the industrial derating scheme. The focus should be on targeted relief rather than on looking at the devolution of further powers at this stage.

I pay tribute to all Members who want to support that vital sector. It has an important role to play, and I hope that the Minister will look at some options for what she could do on rates relief. There are ones that may not be so successful —.

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

Mr Brett: Thank you.

Mr McGrath: I will quickly make a few remarks. I was not intending to speak in the debate, and any suggestions that my remarks look like the ones that Sinéad did not get the chance to make are entirely scurrilous.

I appreciate being able to take part in the debate. One of the best things about it is that nearly half of the contributors have, dare I say, slagged off the Opposition for tabling the motion but ended their contribution by saying, "We are entirely up for supporting it, because we think it is such a good idea". If you are going to dismiss our having taken the opportunity to table the motion, you should have the courage to vote against it and to go back and tell the hospitality and tourism industry in your constituency that you are not supporting it. I am confident that we can look forward to full support for our motion.

I want to speak about the VAT differential and how it creates an imbalance North and South and to give a contribution from a few of the sectors. Colin Neill from Hospitality Ulster, whom we all know, has said that we suffer not only from having one of the highest hospitality VAT rates in western Europe but from the proximity of the Republic, with which we share a border, which creates a significant disadvantage on our doorstep. Similarly, the Federation of Small Businesses has made the extension of the reduced rate of VAT one of its key asks of the Treasury. Parties from across the House have called for the reduction in VAT in the debate, with many pointing towards how a reduction in VAT in the North could level the playing field between businesses North and South. I echo my constituency colleague's remarks about how it makes sense for businesses close to the border to have a level playing field when it comes to their outgoings.

The cost of such an intervention will be debated, and our motion calls for options to be brought forward alongside a wider tourism and hospitality support package. However, harmonising VAT levels across the island will provide the boost that businesses need, particularly those in the hospitality and tourism

sectors, which have been absolutely hammered by the cost increases over the past years. In fact, Joe Dolan — the other one, I think — the chief executive of the Irish Hotel Federation, called the South's reduction in VAT:

"the single largest job creation initiative in the history of the state".

We are not talking about something that will have a minimal impact. If we are going to support those crucial businesses in our constituencies, we need to think big in the North as well. We argue that that starts by bringing forward a costed package of interventions, including those relating to the devolution of VAT for hospitality.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call the Finance Minister to respond. Minister, you have up to 10 minutes.

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): I welcome the opportunity to speak about this important issue. Tourism provides jobs for 75,000 people in the North, and 70% of those are outside Belfast. Therefore, that sector is key to delivering regionally balanced economic development, which is one of the key priorities for the Economy Minister, and supports jobs across the North. Hospitality is a crucial sector that plays a significant role in the success and growth of the tourism sector. Over a third of visitor spend in 2019 was on food and drink.

Hospitality and tourism businesses have faced many challenges in recent years. They were severely impacted on by the COVID pandemic, when they faced significant periods of closure and restrictions on how they could operate. More recently, they have faced new pressures presented by the cost-of-living and cost-of-doing-business crises. We have seen large fluctuations in energy prices driven by our continued reliance on importing fossil fuels. In addition, VAT for hospitality here is set by the British Government at 20%, compared with 13.5% in the South. That rate significantly impacts on the hospitality sector's cost base. As others have said, that impact is further emphasised in border counties, especially when customers come to make significant purchasing decisions such as selecting venues in which to host events.

VAT was previously reduced to support those sectors during the pandemic. My officials continue to highlight the adverse impacts of the VAT rate in their regular meetings with their Treasury counterparts. They will continue to emphasise the economic importance of a

reduction in VAT for the sector to help struggling businesses and safeguard jobs here and to stress the impact of the relatively high rate in the North compared with the South.

As my colleague Philip McGuigan said, Sinn Féin wants to see the harmonisation of VAT across the island and the maximum devolution of fiscal powers. The Fiscal Commission published its final report on 19 May 2022. It included a comprehensive suite of recommendations for progressing fiscal devolution. However, the devolution of VAT was not a recommendation made by the Fiscal Commission, with the recommendation being that other taxes be prioritised. I will consider responses to the Fiscal Commission consultation and bring proposals to the Executive in respect of fiscal powers. Currently, the focus remains on making the case to the British Government to reduce the VAT rate here. As Members are aware, when we were setting the Budget for 2024-25, demands for funding outstripped the available funding many times over. Any interventions have to be delivered in that difficult budgetary context.

As Sorcha Eastwood said, addressing the challenges of rising costs cuts across several areas of government, including the Department for Communities, the Department for the Economy, my Department and the councils. The Department for the Economy is taking steps to support businesses through the delivery of the Executive's path to net zero energy strategy, a key objective of which is to ensure that all businesses have access to essential and affordable energy. Invest NI launched the energy and resource efficiency scheme on 8 May. That five-year programme is open for applications and will offer businesses grants of up to £150,000 for investment in areas such as lighting, heating and cooling equipment, motors and drives, compressed air systems and on-site renewable energy generation. That grant will help companies to invest in technologies that reduce energy consumption and carbon emissions, which will help to lower costs.

Tourism NI provides a suite of advisory supports to help tourism and hospitality businesses to reduce costs, improve productivity and be more sustainable, including the "Leaner and Greener" and "Innovate Tourism" initiatives. Tourism NI's initiatives also include the "Make it Here!" campaign to boost recruitment and retention in the tourism and hospitality sectors; a comprehensive plan to further develop food and drink tourism over the next five years; high-profile and high-impact marketing campaigns to continue to drive

awareness of what we have to offer; tailored courses, such as "Get into Tourism", to encourage new people into the sector; and engaging with young people on tourism and hospitality as a career option. That is an ongoing area of important work that includes partnering with the educational charity Springboard to deliver schools programmes. Tourism NI also provides funding and support to the hospitality and tourism skills (HATS) network, which delivers a range of collaborative activity to attract and retain people in the sector, as well as working closely with Hospitality Ulster and other organisations on skills and recruitment issues in the sector.

Invest NI supports capital investment in tourism accommodation outside greater Belfast through its tourism development scheme. Invest NI works with around 52 hotels and guest accommodation providers, giving them advice and support towards investment in skills development, innovation, management information systems and energy efficiency.

Last year, 65% of the hospitality sector was supported by my Department's small business rate relief scheme, which provides businesses with a reduction of between 20% and 50% on their rates. My Department recently extended that into 2024-25. There have been calls to match the additional support provided for those in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors in England. Locally, rates are a devolved matter, and, due to the differences in tax bases, we are unable to afford the level of support that is available in England to such an extensive range of businesses across retail, hospitality and leisure. Those properties make up the core base of our tax base. Likewise, neither Scotland nor Wales have been able to replicate the level of relief provided in England for 2024-25.

The whole business rates system has repeatedly been subject to public consultation, review, reform and revision over the past two decades — in 2007, 2012, 2016, 2017, 2019 and, most recently, this year, 2023-24. My Department is undertaking a strategic assessment of business rate reliefs following the consultation, which closed in February. Over 1,400 people responded to that consultation, and I want to take time to consider their views. In addition, the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre is undertaking independent academic research on the impact of current business rate poundage differentials. I am open to working with external bodies in order to obtain an independent view of how the system may be recalibrated.

During the pandemic, the rating system was deemed modern and robust enough to be fully repurposed as the vehicle that could rapidly deliver £1.3 billion of financial assistance to businesses through the targeted rates holidays and several grant schemes, much of which supported many in the hospitality and tourism sectors. The issue for the Executive as regards the hospitality sector's interaction with the rating system is whether the Executive should provide that sector with support in addition to a share of the existing £21.5 million small business rate relief currently being awarded to 65% of the hospitality sector. I have already met representatives of the hospitality industry on a number of occasions since taking up office to discuss the challenges for the sector and Reval2026. I am also meeting representatives of Hospitality Ulster later this week to continue my engagement with the sector.

Along with my colleague the Minister for the Economy and her predecessor, I have been hugely impressed by the optimism, energy and ambition of hospitality and tourism businesses. Minister Hargey sees her Department's role as enabling those industries to continue to grow in a way that aligns with an economic vision of a productive, regionally balanced net zero economy with good jobs. In fulfilling that role, she will bring forward a tourism vision and action plan that will set out a range of actions to support the growth of the tourism sector. In order to deliver that work, the Economy Minister intends to establish a tourism partnership board made up of representatives from tourism and hospitality, Executive Departments and local government. The board will help to develop and oversee an action plan that will be co-designed and co-delivered with the industry. The public and tourism industry-wide consultation that took place between November 2023 and February 2024 will also inform that action plan.

Like everyone here, I value hospitality and tourism businesses immensely. They deliver value to the economy across all our constituencies, and they are an important part of the fabric of our communities. I am very aware of the challenges that all businesses face, and that is why I and my Executive colleagues are determined to continue to offer a range of supports to hospitality and tourism businesses, especially through the vital work of Tourism NI and Invest NI. In addition, my officials will continue to lobby the British Government on reducing VAT levels, given the damaging impact that they are having on the sector.

6.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you for that response, Minister. I call David Honeyford to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. Mr Honeyford, you have up to three minutes.

Mr Honeyford: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Approximately four weeks ago in the Chamber, I raised the issue of the closure of Clenaghans restaurant in Aghalee and of the Owl and Pussycat cafe in Hillsborough, as Sorcha referenced. Since then, I have raised the issue at the Economy Committee and at Question Time, and I thank the Minister for meeting Colin Neill and the sector. I have had so many messages from across Northern Ireland asking me to keep speaking up on the issue.

The demographic of our hospitality businesses is unique. Most operators are local and do not have the national chains trading in the region. Mike referred to that. Most businesses are small in turnover and job numbers, which means that taxation, VAT and business rate burdens fall heavily on our local community and local hospitality and those businesses do not have access to the economies of scale that larger chains have. Yet, in England, larger chains have rates relief, which has been applied at 75% for three years in a row for all hospitality, retail and leisure businesses. That has not been replicated here, so, frankly, we are losing businesses unnecessarily.

The Alliance amendment focuses on reviewing our rating structure as a much more practical way for the Assembly to help. As Eóin detailed, Alliance calls for an independent review of non-domestic rate relief, including small business rate relief. The Assembly lacks the ability to target economic support and growth easily through tax mechanisms, which, Alliance believes, we need to do. To grow our economy, we need to understand how any relief could be better targeted at sectors that most need support. We need to give the Assembly the ability to target, support and encourage further economic growth and create more jobs.

Alliance believes that all taxation should be progressive; Eóin went through bits of that. The review must prioritise creating a fair system that builds growth. It simply cannot be fair that businesses in our cities, towns and villages carry a higher percentage tax burden than businesses in other areas do. That needs to be reviewed as a whole.

We are the only UK region that does not have a rural rate relief scheme to support the rural community and view the businesses there — the retail businesses or the village pub — as

community facilities as well as a businesses. That would help to support rural communities, so Alliance would support a review of rural rates relief.

I have cut my speech to shreds. Hopefully, in that quick three minutes, I have summed up our position. I support our amendment and the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you. I call Matthew O'Toole to wind up the debate on the motion. Mr O'Toole, you have up to five minutes.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank everyone who participated in the debate. It has been thought-provoking and colourful, which is always fun. I have never experienced a situation like this. Clearly, in opposition, we are winning friends and influencing people. A succession of people got up to slag us off and then said that they would agree with our proposal, so we are making some progress.

I will reflect on some of the comments made. I think that there is broad consensus that hospitality and tourism are disproportionately important economic drivers for this region. That is obvious. We all know that the tourism offer in Ireland as a whole is unique and special. We are deeply proud of it, and it is tied into deep cultural and communal things that we cherish. It is also the case that we have not provided enough support, certainly in more recent years, particularly for some of the smaller, family-owned businesses as they struggle with increased costs. There are associated social benefits with them that are not simply about inward tourism to Northern Ireland but are societal and communal benefits.

Before I touch on a few of the comments, it is important to say that a few Members commented on the fact that we are calling for the devolution of VAT for hospitality and implying that that would necessarily mean that VAT would definitely be devolved and would definitely be lowered.

We definitely need to look at those things, and there are strong arguments for them, but our motion is very careful not to call for a specific proposal that will cost x amount, unlike some Executive party motions that I could mention. Since Mr Nesbitt —

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I will give way in one second.

Since Mr Nesbitt and Mr Brett both raised the issue of cost, I will say that recent studies suggest that the cost of lowering hospitality VAT to 5% could be about £16 million annually. Obviously, that would be significantly less if it were to simply equalise VAT with the lower rate in the Republic, which is 13.5%, so it would probably be closer to a figure in the single millions of pounds. That, however, would all be subject to policy rotation. We are not saying that it should definitely happen; we are saying that it should be brought forward for consideration. I will give way briefly to Mr Nesbitt.

Mr Nesbitt: I am grateful to the leader of the Opposition for giving way. I seek clarification. If I were to go back to the Northern Ireland Committee, Irish Congress of Trade Unions and say: "I supported the motion. Don't worry. They are asking the Minister only to look at this bad policy", what would it say?

Mr O'Toole: The Member quoted the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, and its input is welcome. We maintain a close and positive relationship with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. On this occasion, we think that there are strong arguments for examining this policy. Of course, interest groups will occasionally disagree with particular policy proposals. This is a specific proposal that we think should be examined, but we are not, as the Member acknowledged, saying anything definitively. There are, however, strong arguments for an examination.

Paul Frew mentioned some of my previous work on licensing. I tabled some amendments, which passed, on licensing. It is true that one or two people registered concern, and they were relatively cautious amendments that just reviewed how the licensing system works. It is intriguing to hear Mr Frew criticise them now. He may not be aware — we were using proxy voting at the time — that he voted for my amendments.

Mr Frew: It was not an issue.

Mr O'Toole: As Peter Cook said:

"I've been distorted, I've been misrepresented, and I've been quoted accurately",

which is worst of all. On that note, I am tempted to quote a certain Mr Ian Paisley Jr, whom I do not quote that often. He is another North Antrim

representative, along with Mr McGuigan and Mr Frew. He once stated that he wanted to:

"remove VAT on tourism and hospitality so that we can compete fairly with our land-border neighbour."

I would not necessarily talk about competing with our "land-border neighbour", but we have inevitably, rightly and positively integrated our all-Ireland tourism offer: some 70% of our visitors come via Dublin Airport. That is why Tourism Ireland exists and why we support extending the Wild Atlantic Way and, indeed, Ireland's Ancient East.

The motion asks the Minister to look at the potential devolution of VAT. We have mentioned Dublin Airport and competing with our "land-border neighbour". There is an example of very bad taxation devolution — I see some of my colleagues across the Chamber are rolling their eyes — but it is true that the policy to devolve long-haul air passenger duty to Northern Ireland has generated precisely zero long-haul flights from Belfast International Airport, but we pay the princely sum of £2.5 million a year. If we moved the £2.5 million that we pay for phantom flights and used it to pay direct grants or pay for a VAT reduction for the hospitality businesses, that would be more impactful than paying for non-existent flights.

The hospitality sector is critical. There is a clear argument for harmonisation, but, more broadly, there is an argument for support.

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

Mr O'Toole: The motion simply calls for a package of support to be examined and I commend it to the Assembly.

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

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the pressures facing hospitality and tourism businesses across Northern Ireland; notes the impact of additional rates bills on top of energy and other cost increases; further notes the impact of inflation caused by the chaotic fiscal interventions of successive Conservative Party Governments; notes the vital importance of

tourism and hospitality businesses to local economic development; and calls on the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy to bring forward a package of costed interventions to support the sector, including options for the devolution of VAT for hospitality and an independent review of non-domestic rate reliefs to fortify this important sector and create the conditions for jobs growth.

Adjourned at 6.24 pm.