



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 13 June 2016
Volume 114, No 6

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O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
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Palmer, Mrs Jenny (Lagan Valley)
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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 13 June 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Mr Speaker: Members, I want to start this afternoon with some brief remarks. Our first proper week of plenary business was a very positive example of the potential of the Assembly. The Deputy Speakers and I are struck by the different atmosphere in which we have started this mandate. Like any political institution, there will be disagreements between Members and parties in the months and years ahead, but our scrutiny and legislative functions will be much more productive if we express our differences with courtesy and respect. In that context, there are just some general points about how our debates are conducted that I want to bring to the attention of new and, indeed, returning Members.

Constructive debate is as much about listening and responding to the contribution of others as it is about making your own speech. Therefore, if Members wish to contribute in a debate and cannot be in attendance for the full duration, they are expected to be in the Chamber at the start of the debate and for at least two speeches before and two speeches after their own. From the Chair, the Deputy Speakers and I will always seek to include as many as possible in a debate. Therefore, as a courtesy to others, Members should prioritise what they want to say and move to an immediate conclusion when whoever is in the Chair intervenes to point out that their time is up. If Members repeatedly carry on speaking beyond the agreed time, it is disrespectful not only to whoever is in the Chair, who is trying to accommodate other colleagues, but to Members with equally valid views.

I am keen to encourage engaging debate, with interventions between Members, but references to each other should always be respectful and good-tempered. Members should abide by the existing conventions requiring the use of proper names and official titles when referring to other Members, Ministers or parties. Members should also focus on debating the issue at hand. There is sufficient scope for the cut and

thrust of debate, through Members explaining their own policy positions and challenging those of others, without resorting to denigrating the personal integrity of other Members.

Whether in the Government, the Opposition or on the Back Benches across the House, I have no doubt that all of us are here to seek the best for the people we represent. The Deputy Speakers and I will facilitate Members to articulate their views as best we can. The understandable focus on outstanding issues in the past may have slowed our evolution as a parliamentary institution, but all Members have a role in its development. Maintaining a culture of constructive debate in which Members are focused on considering the views of other Members as they are making their contribution can only be good for the reputation of this institution.

Finally, before we commence today's formal business, I know that many people received awards at the weekend, including our colleague Mr Dunne. However, I take this opportunity on behalf of the House to congratulate the chief executive, Trevor Reaney, on being awarded a CBE by Her Majesty in the Birthday Honours. It is a thoroughly well-deserved award.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Matters of the Day

Orlando Shooting

Mr Speaker: Mr Nesbitt has been given leave to make a statement on the mass shooting in Orlando, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I shall not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Mr Nesbitt: We return to the House after the weekend, which is a time traditionally set aside for us to pursue our passions and our lifestyle choices, whether it be the arts, culture, religion, sport or recreation. I wish I could be standing here congratulating Rory Best and the Irish rugby team on their phenomenal success in South Africa at the weekend or welcoming Northern Ireland's return to the finals of a major football tournament, although that has been overshadowed not just by the result but by the tragic death of Darren Rodgers, which we will hear about in greater detail in a moment.

As somebody who has lost a friend on a holiday in continental Europe, I have some understanding of the shock of such a sudden loss and of realising that somebody you thought was going to be in your life forever is no longer in your life at all. That feeling is being replicated in the United States in no fewer than 50 families because of the attack in the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, where a single gunman killed 50 people and injured 53, some of whom, as we speak, are fighting for their lives. It was described by President Obama as:

"an act of terror and an act of hate."

Those are two things we know about only too well in this country. I am very struck by the quote attributed to the gunman's father, who said that his son had become "very angry" when he saw two men kissing. What a way to express your anger. Fifty people are dead. What a lesson to us all about intolerance in our society and how we must not permit it to infect how we think.

We have our own special relationship, I think, in Northern Ireland with the United States. It is a history that goes back centuries. Many of our citizens holiday in Florida, many Floridians and Americans holiday here and, of course, many Americans invest in Northern Ireland. We have a lot at stake in our relationship with the United States. I would like to, with your permission, Mr Speaker, ask you to write to President Obama on behalf of the Assembly and the House to express not only our shock but our solidarity with all the people of the United States at this shocking and tragic time.

Mr Clarke: It has been a very painful weekend for the families of those involved. My heartfelt apologies go to those families. I thought about them over the weekend. As the previous Member has said, similar events have happened, albeit not in the same numbers, on our shores here in Northern Ireland. It was not right here, it has never been right and it has proven never to be right. There is nothing we

can do, in terms of words of comfort we can give to the families of those people who were brutally murdered at the weekend, other than give them prayerful support. I suggest that Members keep them, and their families, in their prayers over the coming days and weeks ahead.

Mr Lynch: I want to express my shock and horror at the multiple deaths and 53 injuries. My heartfelt condolences go to the family, and also on behalf of my party. These people were targeted simply because they were gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT). This attack has brought into sharp focus the fact that, despite moves towards equality, LGBT people in the West have massive issues. The perpetrator of this murderous event was not born homophobic — he was taught it. We as political leaders — I agree with much of what Members have said — must stand together on this issue and face down homophobic behaviour. We must send out a message to people at every level that human beings are valued as equal.

The fact that people cannot live and get married here is a problem. That is wrong. We need to change the law so that all citizens are treated equally.

Mr Eastwood: I thank Mr Nesbitt for bringing this matter of the day to the House. It is extremely important that we stand with people all across the world in revulsion at what has happened in Orlando. It is shocking that so many people could be gunned down in such a way, and even more shocking that so much hatred can reside within one person. We have seen this type of hatred acted out against our gay community right across the world. I think of places like Uganda, and other parts of the world, where gay people are not treated the way they should be. It is not for me, or for us, to talk about the internal laws of the United States, but it is important that our friends in the US hear that we cannot understand how anybody can get their hands on automatic weapons and use them in this way. I think it is important to make this point.

It is also important that we not meet hate with hate: that we meet it with love and we do not give succour to the base instinct that has been so prevalent within US politics in recent times. All of us need to show minorities in our community that they play a full and equal part in our everyday lives. We here, and right cross the world, need to ensure that the gay community feel equal and full citizens. We have to do everything we can, and change

whatever law we have to change, to make sure that happens.

Mrs Long: I would like to associate myself with the comments that have been made by others, and to thank Mike Nesbitt for bringing this matter to the House. I think anyone who has read and heard the horror of the last moments of those who died, or were injured, in the Pulse nightclub could not fail to be moved. This was a horrendous, brutal and profoundly homophobic terrorist attack, and it should be condemned by all right-thinking people. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families and the friends of those who have been murdered. They are also with those who have been injured, and also with the LGBT community more widely. We should be under no illusion that gay clubs are not only places for fun and enjoyment, they are also safe spaces for members of our community who often feel afraid, intimidated, threatened and ostracised.

When such spaces are violated in that way, the ripples of fear are much wider than in the immediate vicinity. Fear ripples out among the gay community right across the globe. I stand in solidarity not just with those in Orlando and the United States but with those globally who are persecuted for their sexuality.

12.15 pm

It is vital that the attack be properly investigated, and, whatever the warped motivation of the individual who launched it, it is important that what we replace that homophobia with is not another form of bigotry and that we keep our remarks temperate. Our response must be to stand against homophobia, terrorism and violence of any kind. Our response must be to stand for the values of an open, liberal and tolerant democracy and to redouble our efforts to build that here at home and abroad. That will be the best tribute to those who lost their lives in this horrendous attack.

Mr Allister: I join the condemnation of the horrendous attack. Yet again, the Western World has been demonstrated to be so vulnerable to Islamist terrorism. That is what it was, and those who seek to cloak it as otherwise do the Western World no service. It is quite clear that, in our society, there are those who have come to live amongst us who share no values, no common cause of interest and no respect for the sanctity of human life, and who are prepared, be it a perverted view or otherwise of their cause, to visit the most horrendous terror on society. It needs to be

called out for what it is and condemned for what it is.

We in the West are particularly vulnerable now to these sleeper terrorists of Islamic persuasion who are visiting the horrors of their viewpoint on us. I condemn that, and I think of and pray for those who have been so suddenly bereaved by that horror. Just as we in this Province have lived through the horrors of terrorism, be it Greysteel, La Mon, Kingsmills or anywhere else, so we know the vile cruelty of terrorism that comes without justification in any cause.

Mr E McCann: I, of course, associate myself with the remarks that have been made so far regarding the horror and distress that we all will have felt at the news from Florida last night. That terrible atrocity is a reminder that, despite all the social advances and changes in the legislative framework over recent years in this part of the world, although we have not completed the journey yet, and all around the world, LGBT people still face hatred and violence. Uganda has been mentioned, and anyone who looks at the background to the treatment of LGBT people in Uganda and the killings there will be aware of the extent of the problem not just in the United States but elsewhere.

I welcome the statement that was made last night by LGBT Against Islamophobia, an international organisation, in which it appealed to people not to allow the atrocity to be used to whip up hatred against any section of the community and, in particular, not to allow it to be used to intensify the Islamophobia that is being spread in the United States, including by very powerful people. I regard it as ominous that one of the presumptive presidential candidates in the United States last night issued a statement announcing that he will be expressing his forthright views in a major speech on Orlando tonight. We wait to hear what he has to say, but it would be foolish of any of us to imagine that the atrocity will not be used for nefarious purposes by people who are peddlers of hate to exactly the same extent as the Islamic fundamentalist ideologues who are behind the thinking of those who perpetrated the atrocity are.

It is also relevant to mention the fact, given that reference has been made to people from other cultures coming here, that the presumed perpetrator of the Orlando atrocity was American born. He did not come from anywhere but the local neighbourhood. We should keep in mind that Western forces do not simply come among people of Muslim lands but have actually come above them in drones or in

aeroplanes and have been massacring — massacring — thousands of Muslims over recent years. That is not in any way, not by one iota or a sliver of 1%, a justification for what happened in Orlando but it is part of the context in which we could understand it. We should be against all hatred and killing, no matter where it comes from.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to —

Mr E McCann: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

Death of a Northern Ireland Football Fan in Nice

Mr Speaker: Mr Robin Swann has been given leave to make a statement on the death of a Northern Ireland fan in Nice, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order until this item has been finalised.

Mr Swann: It is with sadness that I make this statement this morning. Death leaves a heartache that no one can heal. We were all in shock and sadness this morning when we heard of the death of a Northern Ireland fan in Nice, young Darren Rodgers who was 24 years old. He was a young man who went, like many others, to France to support his team and his country at the football. He was a young man whose life was in front of him but has been tragically cut short.

The town of Ballymena is numb due to the news that is slowly filtering out, and Northern Ireland fans in France are trying to understand the loss of one of their own. It puts things into perspective. I ask the fans who are out there, and those intending to go, to look after one another and themselves and to stay safe. The thoughts of the House, as with the other matter of the day, are with Darren's family and friends as they come to terms with the loss of a friend and a loved one.

Darren's is the second fatality to occur in my constituency this morning. There has also been a death from a road traffic accident in Ballymoney. There will be two homes this evening in North Antrim that will have empty chairs and it is right and proper that we reflect on that and think of those families at this time.

Mr Storey: In life we are in the midst of death. How sad it is for Members of the House to have to come again and be reminded that there is but a step between us and death. None of us know, when we rise in the morning, who it is that will prepare our body for the shroud. When Darren went to France, none of us knew or thought that the celebrations that we would have as a nation would be tempered with such sadness.

We extend our sincere sympathy to his family, friends and his community. As with the families in Orlando and families across the globe who, because of a variety of issues and problems, face death. It is good for us all to take a moment in the Chamber and remember that we are all mortal and that there will come a day when each of us will pass from this scene of time to eternity. Where is our comfort in the midst of sorrow? The psalmist David penned it well when he wrote:

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

It is sad that there are those who believe that death — the taking of innocent life — is sometimes justifiable, whether it is in the sick mind of someone filled with the hatred of his cause under the banner of religion, such as we saw in Orlando, or for some political cause. This little country of ours has seen too many funerals, too many sad days. I trust that, as we move forward as a society, the one thing that we can do collectively in this House is stand together to say that there should never, ever again be any justification for death.

I say to Darren's family and the wider football community, and to Superintendent Goddard from the PSNI, who is there at this time, that our thoughts and prayers are with you all.

Mr McCartney: Ar son Shinn Féin, ba mhaith liom comhbhrón a dhéanamh le clann Darren Rodgers, a fuair bás aréir. On behalf of Sinn Féin, I offer our sincere sympathies to the family of Darren Rodgers, who died last night in a tragic accident in Nice, in France, in what was obviously a time of great joy, a festival of football. I know that Paul Frew knew the man personally and that he played for Braid United, so he was obviously a passionate soccer player and, indeed, soccer fan.

At a time of great joy, to have this type of tragedy visited upon himself and his wider family, our thoughts and prayers are very much with them. I hope that there is some consolation in whatever efforts can be made to ensure the safe and speedy return of the body

because, sometimes in these tragedies, it can take a long time for people to be repatriated. I hope that his family can get a speedy return and have some solace in what are tragic times for them and the community in north Antrim.

Ms Hanna: I would like to associate our party with the comments of others and add our sincere condolences to this young man's family and, as others have said, to the wider footballing family.

It was obviously a trip of a lifetime. He probably saved up for it, and the memories would have sustained him and his mates for years to come. It is devastating that an accident of this nature has happened. They will take a long time to get over it, particularly at that formative age. I hope that they look after one another in the coming weeks, during the rest of the trip and in the years to come.

I am no footballing expert but, like a lot of people, I have been so encouraged by the positivity of fans of both the teams on this island, in particular how they have related to each other and to other teams as well. They know that, other than people who obsess about the politics of football, it is about people getting together, using their best endeavours, going out and putting on a show for the benefit and enjoyment of the people who watch.

I had my first trip to Windsor Park a couple of weeks ago to watch Northern Ireland in their last match before heading off. I was very taken by the positivity and warmth of that fan base, of which Darren would have been one, and he was probably there. We send our deepest condolences to his family and to all his friends as they come to terms with this.

Mr Ford: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I also extend our condolences to the family of Darren Rodgers. It was a matter of great shock and sadness for those who thought that, this weekend, we could celebrate the result of a rugby match in South Africa and at least a creditable performance on the football field in Nice, and to then hear that there are things much more important than sporting achievement, which will have deeply affected not just a family but a circle of friends.

As was said, Darren was not just a football fan but a football participant who enriched the life of Braid United. By the remarks already on social media, which refer to him as a true gentleman who contributed a great deal, he was clearly well respected. I understand that the green and white army will pay tribute to him at the Ukraine match. That is appropriate, but it is also

appropriate that, in this place, we remember his friends and family at this time.

I suppose that it is particularly disappointing after all the positivity that surrounded the match. The fact is that it is not always the case that, at football matches, supporters of the two teams can go to a match together, can come away from it together and can celebrate together in a constructive and positive relationship, and that perhaps makes it even more poignant that there was a tragic end to that night for one particular individual. We can assure the family, the friends and the playing colleagues of Darren Rodgers that he will be in the thoughts and the prayers of all of us at this time.

12.30 pm

Mr Allister: I thank Mr Swann for bringing this matter to the House, and I join in expressing condolences to the family of this young constituent. It is a reminder of how quickly joy can turn to sorrow, and none of us anticipated that we would be standing here today speaking in these terms about the joyous visit of so many to France. The football fraternity are a very close fraternity, and their enthusiasm knows no bounds. No doubt they all set off to France with unbounded enthusiasm and joy, and, today, many are devastated. One of my colleagues, Alderman McDonald of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, is very much involved in the football fraternity and was with Darren yesterday. He was talking to him, and little did he or anyone think that today we would be mourning his passing.

I join with those who have made an appeal to the authorities to make sure that there is speedy return of the body. We do not want this tragedy compounded by delays in that regard. The family in Ballymena who are so grieving today need to know that all possible is being done to help. Our thoughts also need to be with the football fraternity, over whom this dark cloud now rests in the rest of this campaign, because it will be a difficult time, while they seek to continue to enjoy themselves, to realise that one who was with them is no longer with them. Therefore, no matter what way you look at this, this is a profound tragedy in which we commit to our thoughts and prayers all who are affected by it.

Mr Speaker: I thank Members for that.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that I have received the resignation of Mr William Irwin as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure with effect from 7 June 2016. The nominating officer of the Democratic Unionist Party, Mrs Arlene Foster, has nominated Mr George Robinson to fill the vacancy with effect from 9 June 2016.

Public Petition: Bell-Gray House, Newtownstewart

Mr Speaker: Ms Michaela Boyle has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak.

Ms Boyle: Mr Speaker, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for allowing me to bring this public petition to the House, and I thank the Business Office also. I want to welcome those who have travelled here today from Newtownstewart and surrounding areas in my constituency to be with us in support of this petition. I also want to take the opportunity to thank the unions and, indeed, Mr Niall McCarroll for being here today.

Apex Housing Association took a decision on 14 April to inform residents and staff of Bell-Gray nursing home in Newtownstewart of its intention to close this vital community service. This announcement obviously sent shock waves and caused great stress and worry for residents, staff and their families. The decision is tantamount to having an impact on their well-being and mental health.

Bell-Gray provides accommodation with care for 29 people all over the age of 70, and there are 75 people employed at the nursing home. The reasons being put forward by Apex Housing Association to justify the closure of this nursing home need to be clarified and investigated thoroughly.

Today we are seeking any assistance the Health Minister and her Department can provide in finding a solution to this decision. The proposed closure of this nursing home will have a detrimental impact not only on residents, their families and staff but on the local business community. West Tyrone cannot afford to lose any more jobs. More job losses would represent a significant financial loss to the local business community.

I congratulate the residents, their families, staff and the unions for getting behind the campaign to keep this much-needed facility in Newtownstewart open. The campaign is fully supported by all six MLAs in West Tyrone and the MP.

Whilst we recognise that this is a private organisation, we are calling on the Health Minister to speak with the chief executive and officials from the Western Trust and to Apex Housing to review the decision so that those who have lived in the home and called it their home for a long, long time can remain there.

Ms Boyle moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward a copy to the Health Minister and the Committee.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion will be treated as a business motion and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr William Irwin replace Mr George Robinson as a member of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. — [Mr Clarke.]

Business Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion will be treated as a business motion and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Dr Stephen Farry be appointed as a member of the Business Committee. — [Mr Clarke.]

Council of Europe: Regional Chamber of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion will be treated as a business motion and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That this Assembly nominates Mr Stewart Dickson to be a full member of the regional

chamber of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe with effect from October 2016. — [Mr Clarke.]

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4): Suspension

Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 13 June 2016.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 13 June 2016.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the 2014-15 Excess Votes

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2016-17

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The next two motions relate to the Supply resolutions, and, as usual, there will be a single debate on the motions. I shall ask the Clerk to read the first motion on the 2014-15 Excess Votes and call on the Minister to move it. The debate on the two motions will then begin. When all who wish to speak have done so, or when the time limit is reached, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The second motion — the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2016-17 — will then be read into the record, and I will call the

Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours and 30 minutes for the debate. The Minister will have up to 60 minutes to allocate at his discretion between proposing and winding up. All other Members will have seven minutes. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves that resources, not exceeding £69,281,105.15 be authorised for use by the Department of Finance and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, for the year ending 31 March 2015, as summarised in part II of the 2014-15 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,986,369,200, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017; and that resources, not exceeding £8,693,136,600, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1·3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 that was laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016.

Nuair a shocraigh muid na rúin seo, ní raibh a fhios againn go mbeadh an áit líonta le brón as siocair an tsléachta in Orlando agus bás Darren Rodgers. Ach cuirfidh mé mo ghuth le guthanna eile a ardaíodh. When we organised today's business, we did not know that it would be a day filled with sadness because of the slaughter in Orlando and the death of Darren Rodgers. I add my voice to those voices that were heard earlier in regard to those deaths.

As you have set out, a Príomh LeasCheann Comhairle, the debate covers the Supply resolution and Excess Votes in respect of the Department of Finance and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission. The resolution seeks the Assembly's approval of the 2016-17 spending plans of Departments and other public bodies, as set out in the Main Estimates. The Main Estimates and Statement of Excesses were laid in the Assembly on Wednesday 1 June 2016.

The resolution before the Assembly relates to the supply of cash and resources for the remainder of the current year — 2016-17 — as detailed in the Main Estimates. A Vote on Account was passed by the Assembly in February, which provided initial allocations for 2016-17 to ensure the continuation of services until the Main Estimates could be presented to the Assembly for approval. This resolution, and the Budget Bill that I will introduce later today, request the balance to complete the total cash and resource requirements of Departments and other public bodies for 2016-17. The balance to complete amounts to almost £8 billion of cash and over £8.6 billion of resources. Those requirements have their origins in the Executive's Budget for 2016-17, which was approved by the Assembly on 19 January 2016, as well as the demand-led annually managed expenditure (AME). On behalf of the Executive, I request and recommend the levels of Supply set out in this resolution under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Accelerated passage is required for the legislation, and there is provision for this specific instance in Standing Orders. I understand that the Committee has agreed to grant accelerated passage. I thank the Chair, Emma Little Pengelly, and members from all sides for that permission, and I place on record my appreciation of their early start to this mandate in agreeing this important step in the process. Le linn na díospóireachta inniu faoin rún tábhachtach seo, tá mé ag súil go gcluinfimid guthanna mórán daoine as achan taobh, agus iad ag úsáid na díospóireachta seo chun ceisteanna tábhachtacha ábhartha a thabhairt chun solais.

During today's debate on this important resolution, I expect that we will hear many voices using the debate to raise important and relevant issues, and I look forward to that. Ón tús, is mian liom an uailmhian atá agam a thabhairt le fios go soiléir go ndéanfaidh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin seo beart de réir a bhriathair i rith mhandáid nua an Tionóil seo.

From the outset, I wish to make clear my ambition for this Executive to deliver over the

new mandate. The expenditure set out in these Supply Estimates will see investment in high-quality public services and, most importantly, a commitment to oppose the austerity programme being driven by the Westminster Government. I aim to work with all our local communities to create a prosperous, shared society and help to grow a stronger economy with opportunity for all.

These Estimates are the means by which the Executive's Budget, which was agreed in January this year, will be brought into effect. I am on record as saying that I believe that that Budget will serve our people well. In particular, I am proud that we are delivering the most generous welfare protection in these islands, with over £500 million specifically to ensure that the most vulnerable people in our society will be protected from the worst excesses of the Tory Government's austerity agenda. We are blocking the bedroom tax, preventing the imposition of water charges and keeping student fees affordable.

12.45 pm

The Westminster Government's austerity programme is self-defeating. I note that the Tories stood locally across 18 constituencies in the last election in May and did not manage to get 10,000 votes across all those constituencies. They have no mandate in the House. Therefore, I believe that our opposition to austerity is a view shared by Members across the House. It is also a view shared by many eminent people whose opinions are well worth listening to. It is interesting that, in recent times, the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) — many people might put the blame for where we are with the IMF — Christine Lagarde has argued:

"In too many countries, economic growth has failed to lift these small boats — while the gorgeous yachts have been riding the waves and enjoying the wind in their sails. In too many cases, poor and middle-class households have come to realize that hard work and determination alone may not be enough to keep them afloat."

I am determined that, under this Executive, the vulnerable people in our society will not be abandoned in a latter-day 'Raft of the Medusa'.

Pope Francis articulated the same issues when he said:

"I think of how many, and not just young people, are unemployed, many times due to

a purely economic conception of society, which seeks selfish profit, beyond the parameters of social justice."

Pope Francis, of course, is one of the pre-eminent opponents of austerity in the world. I assure you that the community and society that we live in is not just an economy; it is a society made of people, each of whom has their own needs and ambitions. We will certainly grow the economy, not as an end in its own right but as a means of providing for all our people, including the most disadvantaged.

I do not believe that anyone in the House accepts the claim of Prime Minister Cameron that we are all in this together in our approach to the recovery. In fact, the truth, as expressed by the bishops of the Anglican Church ahead of the general election last year, is that:

"the greatest burdens of austerity have not been borne by those with the broadest shoulders".

As Minister for the new Department of Finance, I am using the opportunity of the Supply resolution and first Budget Bill of this mandate to signal that I will oppose austerity. I assure you that I stand ready to join other Finance Ministers across all the 28 states of the European Union in speaking out against austerity and the political mentality of profit at any price with no concern for social exclusion.

The 2016-17 financial year, like previous years, will present significant challenges for the Assembly in the provision of public services. That is as a result of the austerity agenda imposed on us from another place. It is up to all of us to work collectively to overcome those challenges. Over coming days, I will meet the Finance Ministers of Wales and Scotland to discuss pooling our resources and making common cause in the interests of all our people. The challenge has been set, and now we must move forward collectively to overcome the barriers in our way. Members will know that I have also spoken to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to relay my concerns and the priority issues that I wish to discuss, and I have written to Chancellor George Osborne seeking an urgent meeting.

The Fresh Start Agreement represents a good start. It provided significant additional funding in 2016-17. In addition, the Executive agreed to set aside £135 million to top-up the British welfare arrangements here. Of that amount, £75 million related to welfare enhancements and £60 million related to tax credits. In addition, funding was provided for security and

to tackle paramilitary activity. Additional money was provided for a shared future, and £30 million funding was provided for bodies to deal with the past. Some £50 million was provided for shared and integrated education and shared housing.

The Fresh Start Agreement allowed the Executive to agree a balanced and deliverable Budget for 2016-17. That Budget outcome is reflected in the Estimates before us now; they ensure that the necessary resources are in place as early as possible to allow good planning and delivery of essential public services. It would be easy to stop there and focus solely on delivering public services, but we as an Assembly must continue to support our economy and encourage our private sector as it continues to face financial difficulty — and I am thinking, in particular, of the entrepreneurs and start-ups out there who are trying to create jobs and wealth in our society. We must utilise the resources contained in the Bill in the most effective way possible to ensure that we can provide a sound footing for our businesses, our society and our people.

Given the difficult financial environment, it is important to explore options for enhancing the Executive's capacity to invest, including exploiting our borrowing facility. Borrowing is a normal part of governance, but it should be undertaken only on an affordable and prudent basis. In that context, I welcome last week's announcement of European Investment Bank (EIB) funding for two housing associations here.

The Stormont Agreement and implementation plan confirmed the flexibility to use up to £200 million of borrowing in 2016-17 to fund voluntary exit schemes. Allocations of £117.6 million are being made to Departments in Budget 2016-17 for their proposed schemes. There will be further opportunity for Departments to submit bids to the fund, with allocations for the second tranche being made in June monitoring.

The Fresh Start Agreement also provided the Executive with the flexibility to access the full amount of additional borrowing provided by the Stormont House Agreement, even if it is able to realise the agreed efficiency savings from voluntary exit schemes without switching the full amount of existing borrowing for that purpose. Therefore, any funding not used by the public sector transformation fund (PSTF) may be used for additional capital projects that are suitable for borrowing. That is very welcome.

I have pledged that I will be relentlessly positive, bold and ambitious in investing

prudently and wisely for the future. I know that, across the House, we share a commitment to help support economic growth and the ambitions of our communities. One of the means by which I intend to take forward that investment is with the establishment of a £100 million investment fund. The overall aim of the fund is to promote investment, economic growth and jobs here. The fund will use public money — financial transactions capital — and will seek to address access-to-finance market failure. The intention is that the fund will provide loan, equity or mezzanine finance to viable local private-sector projects that cannot obtain funding from commercial banks. Funding is expected to be provided on commercial terms to avoid falling foul of state aid rules. The success of the fund will be measured by economic outputs rather than by a narrow financial return on capital. The classification of the fund is currently under consideration by the Office for National Statistics, and that will determine the balance sheet treatment of the fund. Until that is resolved, it is not possible to be clear on whether co-investment directly into the fund will be possible. However, there are other ways in which investors can participate in the fund's activities. One is to co-invest at project level, which would then provide the fund with leverage and preserve the fund's capital for other projects. Another is to participate by, for example, buying up project debt once the project is completed and the construction and demand risks have been removed. That would help the fund deliver on its objective to recycle the NI Executive's capital quickly. It is expected that the fund will be in place before the end of the 2016-17 financial year, and that is a priority for me.

It is easy to interpret some of the constraints that we face as a reflection of an economy in difficulty; I am certain, however, that we face 2016-17 in a better position than we might have envisaged. There are signs that the economy is beginning to stabilise. I saw another report from the Ulster Bank this morning in that respect. For example, the employment rate rose to 69% in the first quarter of 2016, and the economic inactivity rate fell to 26.3%. Welcome as those figures are, I do not think that they are yet good enough. The latest Bank of England growth forecast suggests that activity will recover later in the year but at rates lower than the historical average. For the North, the April Ulster Bank purchasing managers' index (PMI) signalled another month of expansion. It is the twelfth consecutive month of growth in that index, and it suggests that our economy is on the road to recovery. In fact, over the past three months, the pace of expansion has exceeded the average in Britain. However,

again, the pace of recovery is nowhere near fast enough for me.

We should support those involved in building the economy, equip our workforce and direct our public services to maximise opportunities arising from the position in which we find ourselves. To do that, we need to improve our infrastructure, and we have again responded to that need. We all want to see cranes above the skyline in our cities and towns. Although the Executive agreed only a single-year Budget for 2016-17, the nature of some capital projects means that it is important to provide funding certainty beyond that time span. The Executive have therefore agreed to identify flagship projects for which funding will be agreed now for future periods. Those include, of course, the A5 western transport corridor and the A6, both ultimately serving the north-west, and I know that there are other projects dear to your heart, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, that we wish to move forward in this mandate.

I believe that the Estimates before Members today mark a key step in countering the austerity agenda that others have sought to impose on us; indeed, they will protect the most vulnerable in our society while facilitating a process of development and growth, putting us four-square behind entrepreneurs, start-ups and those building a vibrant economy.

With Members' permission, I will say a few words about the second motion before the Assembly, which concerns an Excess Vote from the Department of Finance and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission. I can confirm that the Public Accounts Committee has considered the Excess Votes and recommended their approval. I am anxious to ensure that the circumstances leading up to the breaches are not repeated. I take that very seriously. I note that steps have been taken in both cases to minimise the risk of a repeat occurrence.

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

Mr Smith: I shall do my best to be uncontroversial.

The motion on the Main Estimates is, to a degree, a technical process, as the Minister has said, providing approval of expenditure for the remainder of this financial year for a Budget agreed in the previous mandate. The Excess Vote motion includes over £68 million incurred

by Department of Finance superannuation due to the incorrect rate being used to calculate the interest on scheme liabilities. I have already raised that issue in Committee and have been assured that it is essentially a technical accounting issue in the AME budget that will have no real impact.

Many Members to speak today will focus on spending lines from specific Departments: my intention is to look at the bigger picture, the overall scope of the Estimates and how we have got to where we are. As this is my maiden speech, it may be helpful to give some personal context. My work background has been about managing change in the public and private sectors. I worked in consultancy for many years, helping businesses and organisations to drive change proactively and, sometimes, in reaction to events. Latterly, I have managed in the public sector. I understand the difficulties and challenges of making change happen in our local public sector. The Estimates come before us today in a challenging financial environment for the Northern Ireland Executive, but the Minister's party continually parrots that the English Tories are to blame for all our ills. I know that the other party of government is now copying that mantra, as the forging of the new coalition Executive continues apace. How long ago the panic of "Vote Arlene to stop Martin" now seems, as the workings of the pre-agreed partnership are exposed.

Treasury austerity measures have, of course, impacted on the Estimates, but other regions and countries in these islands have fared much better in equally challenging financial circumstances and without the benefit of a generous £9 billion subvention, the Barnett formula and the additional money from Fresh Start. The bottom line is that the Estimates do not meet Northern Ireland's requirements, and the blame lies squarely with the DUP/Sinn Féin Executive for failing to progress reform and change in the public sector during the previous nine years. Their inaction and prevarication have got us to that point, and attempts to blame others will not wash.

I know that it is form during a maiden speech to promote your constituency, but the people of Strangford already know that they live in one of the most beautiful constituencies in the UK. I believe that they would prefer us and me today to devote my time to highlighting the Budget issues in our public services.

Our two largest Departments, which provide the schools and hospitals that we all care about, are in financial crisis. The new Health Minister told us on Monday that she needed an increase

in funding to tackle, in her words, "excessive waiting times". The Health Minister went on to say that her Department's waiting list crisis had been caused by:

"increasing demand, financial constraints and a slowness to bring about radical change and reform." [Official Report (Hansard), 6 June 2016, p2, col 2].

That is a critical point: failure to change and failure to reform resulting in financial pressures that lead to a deteriorating service. We await the outcome of Bengoa review, but I hope that this opportunity for change will not gather dust like its predecessors. Additional money was found, pre-election, to tackle waiting lists, but these ad hoc funding allocations, much like the monitoring round process, are too often like using sticking plasters to cover major wounds.

Education is another major source of financial concern. A 0.8% budget reduction for schools is now increased to 8%, as the outgoing Minister refused to fund superannuation, National Insurance and teacher pay increases. School heads now openly warn that the only way to balance budgets is to cut the number of teachers and increase class sizes, yet 41% of the education budget is still held centrally, compared with 10% in other jurisdictions. Of course, we continue to pay for duplication, from teacher training to school facilities. This is more failure to reform and change coming home to roost.

It is also disappointing that the Executive's budget allocations for our higher education institutions have been identified as a soft touch over recent years. Expenditure for teaching grant fell by over 24% between 2010 and 2015, and, in today's Estimates, the trend continues with a consequence of fewer staff and fewer students.

Cuts to higher education would be bad in any circumstances, but they are ridiculous given that the Executive have based their future economic strategy on building a knowledge economy, using reduced corporation tax to transform our private sector.

1.00 pm

I am also concerned that, during last week's Finance Committee, the Minister said that the Executive had not yet agreed whether a cut to corporation tax is affordable. This has resulted in much media speculation, with commentators stating that we are witnessing the start of the Executive's U-turn on this key policy. Perhaps

the Minister could use his summing-up of today's debate as an opportunity to end speculation around the Executive's commitment to corporation tax reduction.

One potential opportunity is in the increasing capital sums that allow for investment in major projects like roads. However, once again, the previous Executive's record has been patchy at best, with failure after failure to progress major projects, thereby missing the opportunity to boost local construction as well as enhance our infrastructure. Desertcreat, the Maze, Belfast Northside, Casement Park — I could go on — all show a lack of capability to draw down funding and deliver on investment.

Of course, that brings me to longer-term funding. The Minister has stated that he wants to grow the funding pie, but additional debt brings its own challenges: the more we borrow, the more interest we pay, leaving less to fund services. Interest is already forecast to hit £200 million a year in the near future, before we add more. We are already the most indebted devolved Administration, with over £1,000 debt per person in Northern Ireland, compared with £400 per person in Scotland, and that is before university and housing association debt is included.

In conclusion, the Estimates before us are the symptom of inaction and failure to reform in the previous nine years. No doubt, in a week's time the Minister will be back in the Chamber to announce monitoring review changes, and I hope he is successful in finding additional funds to help Health and Education. However, I am afraid that it will be no more than a sticking plaster. These Estimates show the scale of reform and change needed, and I urge the Executive to get on with it.

Mrs Little Pengelly (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I will speak first in my role as Chair of the Finance Committee. Senior departmental officials briefed the Committee for Finance last Wednesday in relation to the Main Estimates and the associated Budget (No. 2) Bill. In advance of the meeting, the Department of Finance provided the Committee with a briefing paper, together with advance copies of the Estimates and the Bill.

The Committee, in its scrutiny function, has an important role in deciding whether to grant accelerated passage to Budget Bills under the power in Standing Order 42(2). Importantly, this is on the basis that the Committee is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the expenditure proposals in the Bill.

As Members may be aware, the Vote on Account that was debated by the Assembly during the last mandate was taken on the basis of the 12 Departments, as constituted at that time. However, following restructuring, the Main Estimates now reflect the new nine Departments. In this regard, members questioned officials to establish whether new Departments were experiencing budget reductions against provisions made under the old departmental structures. Officials advised that there have been revisions to the 2015-16 provision and the 2014-15 out-turn, under the subhead detail, in order to offer a level of comparability, but they acknowledged that budgets have reduced against previous years.

Turning to the Supply resolution for the Excess Votes 2014-15, there are two Statements of Excess. Regarding the Statement of Excess relating to the Assembly Commission, the Committee noted the Public Accounts Committee's report that recommended that the Assembly provides the additional resource. However, in noting that an excess of £68.3 million was incurred by the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Committee questioned departmental officials to identify the nature of the issue. In response, members were informed that this arose as a result of a misunderstanding between the former Department and the Government Actuary's Department (GAD) over the interest rate assumption when calculating the interest on scheme liabilities for the principal Civil Service pension scheme that was only identified when GAD was preparing the year-end figures.

Officials provided an assurance that, to mitigate any future occurrences, the Department has built in an additional process that will require the GAD to review the rates before the spring Supplementary Estimates are finalised.

In consideration of further improvement to the processes, it would be helpful if Departments could brief their respective Committees on prior-year out-turn at an early stage. That should enable scrutiny of the incoming Budget to be informed by consideration of the prior-year financial performance of each Department.

In concluding my remarks as Chair of the Committee, I look forward to a constructive working relationship with the new Minister, confident that the Committee will work closely with the Department in exercising its roles in advising, scrutinising and holding the Department to account.

Turning now to speak in my role as a member of the Democratic Unionist Party, the Budget

detail being debated today and over the next few weeks has already been the subject of some considerable debate and discussion, including within the Chamber. It came on the back of what had been a difficult and challenging period for the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive. However, the Fresh Start Agreement has provided a new and optimistic foundation on which to recalibrate and work together collaboratively, focusing on a joint desire to tackle the processes and barriers to effective delivery.

I believe there is a new energy and a fresh hope, as well as a clear determination to make the institutions, this Assembly and our Government work and deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. I warmly welcome this new approach towards building a better Northern Ireland, and some of this is already evident in what is being debated today. I welcome the effective roll-out of the voluntary exit scheme (VES) and the savings that have been realised in that. I welcome the clear agreement on the date and rate of corporation tax, and I welcome the new Minister embracing the previous Minister's agenda of reform and transformation of public services. This opportunity will arise more significantly in the multi-year Budget negotiations in the autumn.

The DUP stands for a strong, sensible and sustainable approach to maximising and managing Northern Ireland's budgetary, economic and fiscal concerns. I know that we will drive that agenda both within and outside government. We are, of course, aware of the many pressures right across the Departments, not least in relation to Health and Education, our universities and our capital infrastructure. Funding is required, but funding alone will not resolve those issues. Fundamental reform is required if we are to get on to a sustainable and managed Budget.

I am realistic. We will continue to have challenging economic and budgetary constraints, but I am confident and optimistic that this new hope and collaborative working will continue. I am determined, as Chair of the Committee and as a Member of the Assembly, to play a fully constructive role in building the better Northern Ireland that I know we jointly want to see.

Mr O'Dowd (The Chairperson of the Audit Committee): I will open my remarks by speaking as Chair of the Audit Committee and will report on the views of the previous Audit Committee on the Budget process. The first meeting of the new Audit Committee will take

place on Wednesday. On behalf of the Audit Committee, I confirm that the provision for the NI Audit Office in the Main Estimates corresponds with the amount agreed by the previous Audit Committee and laid before the Assembly in March just before the end of the last mandate.

As you know, the Estimates provide for a resource budget requirement of £8.193 million for 2016-17. That is made up of resource requirements plus £197,000 relating to Consolidated Fund standing services, less £10,000 in notional charges. With the exception of a minor technical adjustment between the figures for the Consolidated Fund standing services and the net resource requirement, those figures reflect the amounts included in the Audit Office's corporate plan for the years 2016-17 to 2018-19, which the previous Audit Committee considered and approved in February this year.

At that time, the Committee was satisfied that the draft corporate plan allowed for the Audit Office to continue to hold the public sector to account for its spending through its core activities of the financial audit of central and local government bodies and the provision of value-for-money reports for consideration by the Assembly. Also, I understand that, as is the norm, the predecessor Committee gave due regard to advice from the Public Accounts Committee and the then Department of Finance and Personnel when considering the Audit Office's estimate. Prior to agreeing the estimate, the Committee took evidence from the C&AG and senior Audit Office officials on 8 March 2016, during which a range of issues were explored.

The Committee noted that the Audit Office was confident of managing its budget for the incoming year in the light of savings made under the voluntary exit scheme. It also discussed internal changes as a result of the VES, which led to greater flexibilities across different business areas in the organisation. I shall not go into detail on these or on other technical issues that the previous Committee examined, as they were set out in its report on the Estimates of the Audit Office 2016-17, printed on 13 March 2016.

In concluding my remarks in my role as Chair of the Audit Committee, I confirm that the previous Committee was satisfied that the provision in the Estimates will enable the Audit Office to continue to deliver on both its statutory and ad hoc work, which provides the Assembly with truly independent audit assurance in relation to public moneys. The new Audit Committee, as I

stated, will meet on Wednesday this week to receive initial briefings from both the Audit Office and the public services ombudsman. I look forward to working with members of the Committee.

I will now make a few comments in my role as party spokesperson on finance. I welcome the statement set out by the Finance Minister on his vision of our finances going into the future. He has set out the real challenges that we face in the financial constraints that have been imposed on us by the Westminster Government. Contrary to Mr Smith's comments, which may lead Members to believe that the Welsh and Scottish Executives are content with their lot from Westminster, the public record and statements from Ministers, right up to the First Ministers of Wales and Scotland, have pointed out that the financial constraints placed on devolved Administrations in these islands are having a damaging impact on the abilities of local Administrations to deliver public services. That is the reality of the situation. None of the devolved Governments is hailing the economic strategy set out by the Westminster Government as the proper or correct way forward.

As our Finance Minister stated, we have to use our moneys as effectively as possible to ensure that front-line public services continue to be delivered. In doing that, we can stand up to the challenges of austerity, presented to us by the Westminster Government. It is clear from the Fresh Start Agreement that when the senior Executive parties united and spoke with one voice, they were able to secure significant funding for this Executive that was not available previously. We now have the most generous welfare system on these islands. It is far from perfect. It is far from the system that anybody — or most people — in this Chamber would want, but we have managed to achieve something that the Scottish Nationalists and the Welsh Executive could not. We have secured additional funding for welfare and to protect the most vulnerable in our society — from within our own resources, I accept — and an additional £50 million capital to be spent on the construction and refurbishment of schools through shared education and integrated education. That is a major injection not only into education but into our economy.

The Finance Minister has made it clear that he wants to see job creation in our society. While you cannot build an economy simply on the construction industry, construction is an ideal way in this society to pump money into local communities very quickly. Communities see the end result, whether it is a new school or

youth club, refurbished hospitals and community facilities, or additional social housing. That is a physical manifestation of change in our society. It is also an injection into the economy through the construction industry and a very good use of public moneys. The previous Executive secured significant amounts of money for that investment.

The discussion that the Finance Minister has opened up on public borrowing is an important one. Mr Smith put down the challenge as to how the Executive will reform, referring to necessary reforms and change. He did not outline, from the Opposition's point of view, what that means — I look forward to hearing more detail — but no one could say that the previous Executive were not involved in reform. We were. The VES scheme —

1.15 pm

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Dowd: I will. The VES was one fine example of where public-sector workers were allowed to leave posts with dignity, and the savings that have been created from those posts are being reinvested in public services.

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

Ms Hanna: I want to formally wish the Minister well. I admire his defence of these Estimates. I know that you probably did not even have time to open your pencil case before the Department had to issue them, but, as somebody who has shared a constituency with you for the last five years, I do hope that we will see the energy and ambition that people correctly associate with you put into future documents from the Department of Finance. We do not see it in this one.

I note that, in your remarks, you pre-emptively and quite comprehensively pin all the blame on the Conservatives and austerity. We are no fans of them, but the fact of the matter is that you, your party and your partners are now in the driving seat. It is your job to be smarter and more effective with the money and to, as you say, grow the pie and certainly slice it more effectively than has been done in the previous two mandates.

Today, we are addressing the Supply resolutions for the Budget we approved earlier this year and for the Main Estimates for the year ahead. As others have said, it is largely a

matter of process. We accept the procedural requirements for keeping salaries paid and services running and we will not oppose those procedures today. However, we reiterate our concerns about the flawed priorities that the Budget has rubber-stamped and the contorted budgeting process which is a symbol of the systematic process failure of this Executive, particularly in bypassing the Assembly.

I congratulate the previous speaker for his very detailed maiden speech. He correctly raises the issue of the excesses, primarily the £68 million arising from the incorrect rate of interest being applied on pension scheme liability. I agree, just for transparency, that a little bit more clarity will be required on how that happened and how it will be addressed. The Member also touched on the issue of borrowing. Our party is certainly not opposed to borrowing for strategic reasons for viable capital projects — indeed, the reform and reinvestment initiative was an innovation by the SDLP to encourage this sort of sensible economic planning — but, shamefully, this Executive has borrowed something like two thirds of their borrowing capacity for, I believe, revenue purposes and, we believe, for killing jobs, not creating them, in the scheme that the previous Member seems to be very proud of.

The sad life story of this Budget that we are tinkering with in this mid-year process began with disagreements over welfare and the Fresh Start talks that, I think, gave the character of how the Executive would work; that there would not be partnership or accommodation of differences. It was cobbled together to get over an election. We think that this half-year version of it is treading water in the absence of a programme. We are democrats and we accept the outcome of the election, but I think that we are past the time when it is just about having a big mandate: it is about what you do with it. We do not believe that this programme or Budget do anything very substantial with it. The Estimates that we are being asked to consent to come with very little explanation. We are not coming from a position where all these amounts are unjustified, but, in many cases, we do not know for certain what they are being used for. We are in a position to only scrutinise the bulges and contractions in the figures.

This debate comes a week after the discussion on the Programme for Government. I will not go over all that again, but it is fair to say that this does not fill in any of the blanks that many of us felt were in it. The Government parties will start, I am sure, with the single transferable criticism that we are too vague and are not setting out alternatives; but when these

Estimates provide detailed operational plans like "housing" and nothing else, you are not in very good shape to criticise the rest of us for not having a lot of detail.

Like it or not, and most people seem to like it except the parties across, we are in a new phase in the Assembly. Over the coming months of the mandate, we will have to recalibrate the processes. The budgeting scheme is something which desperately needs work. This is the only government institution in these islands that does not have an annual budgetary process. Instead, we have these quarterly reviews and supplements. That has not served Northern Ireland very well nor provided enough strategic focus. Yes, of course, the one-year Budget that we are looking at now is unique in supplementing the additional year of the mandate, but the process is still flawed. We have argued for some time that we need a Budget oversight committee. Regrettably, that was rejected in the last mandate.

We have correctly restructured down to nine Departments. That is a good thing, but it means that each scrutiny Department has more areas to scrutinise, and that has not been factored in effectively. In many cases, the information has not gone before the relevant Committee.

We, as the Opposition, will give good ideas a fair wind. We think that part of that might involve hard decisions and some form of zero-base budgeting. We cannot keep saying, "There is no money for this" or "There is no money for that" and, if anybody makes a suggestion, presenting it as just stealing money off something else. A reformed budgeting process should start as day one. At the moment, we feel that the Budgets are essentially just tinkering with the direct rule Budgets that have not served this place very well for the past 40 years. They are a cut-and-paste of information that is coming over from London, taking by rote what the Treasury is setting down and not really putting any of the creativity and imagination that devolution, and devolution's specific tailoring to circumstances, was supposed to address.

The issue of corporation tax has been raised, and I will not have time to go into it, but we need some clarity on what rebooting the negotiations will mean and on the various positions of the two Government parties. We believe that the devolution of corporation tax will be justified if it brings demonstrable, value-added, productive and decent jobs, but, so far, we have had a lot of rhetoric and no strategy. It

is a myth that investors are waiting for the tax rate to drop. They are not; rather, they are waiting for skilled employees and 21st-century infrastructure. The Budget that we are tinkering with does not go any way to addressing that.

In wrapping up, I will say that one thing that has not been addressed, and I do not expect it to be in this Budget, is the need for some direction on what the Executive are planning to do if we leave the European Union. Anything that we say today will become absolutely irrelevant in two weeks' time if there is a no vote, and we need to know what we will do to address that.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring her remarks to a close.

Ms Hanna: If we are out of the European Union, it will take a lot of money from London and a lot of policy and imagination from this Executive. As the young people say, "Good luck with that".

Dr Farry: First, I join in welcoming the Minister to his new post. I wish him well. Today is the first opportunity for the Assembly in the new mandate to discuss Budget issues and to take a position on the public spending situation as we go forward. As much as I am critical of the positions that have been adopted by the Executive parties, I am slightly concerned about the timidity of the parties in opposition who are allowing the motion to go ahead today as some form of fait accompli. It is our intention to seek a Division later this afternoon or this evening, whenever the vote comes. There are good reasons why we should not simply treat this as a given.

First, the Assembly has until the end of July to pass the Budget (No. 2) Bill, so there is still time in this process. The entire point of having a Budget (No. 1) Bill in February and March and then a separate discussion in June, or even in July, is to allow for greater scrutiny of the Budget and the Supply resolution at this point in the calendar. The point of the first Bill is to allow the Vote on Account to proceed in order to get the money flowing through Departments before taking a step back and having some more detailed consideration. If we are not prepared to do that at this stage, we may as well wrap up the whole process in the one piece of legislation in the spring and get on with it rather than go through a charade at this point. It has to be meaningful and be about setting forward alternatives. I believe that there is an opportunity for the Executive to take the Bill back and reflect further on the points that I and

some of my colleagues will make today and, indeed, those from other parties will make.

We have a further complication, in that there are suggestions that there may be a need for some form of Budget rewrite on an in-year basis. The Budget may well be unravelling as we speak. If that is the case, it is not sufficiently democratic to rewrite a Budget through a monitoring round. A monitoring round is there to reallocate underspends from one Department to another. It is tinkering on the edges, but, if we go back to the situation that prevailed a couple of years ago in which we were passing severe cuts in-year through monitoring round decisions, that has to be subject to proper accountability and scrutiny. If the opportunity exists to have that rethink, and if people believe that it is necessary, that is best done in the context of the formal Supply resolution and Bill rather than for it to be left for scrutiny in the spring Supplementary Estimates in February 2017.

I will set out the issues that we have with the situation that we find ourselves in. We do not believe that the Budget agreed by the Executive and the Assembly is either strategic or sustainable. We voted against it in the Executive and in the Assembly. The process was badly flawed, and it is not a good piece of work. The context, of course, was set by a very late spending round in Westminster, and the issue came to the Executive towards the end of December. There was no draft Budget, and so the Budget was presented to at least two Executive parties with an hour's notice and then rammed through the Executive without any discussion. Facts have proven subsequently that there was time for even some sort of structured consultation with some key stakeholders, but that was passed up. So there is a major issue here with how we got to the Budget that is before us. The process was flawed, and it came in the wake of Fresh Start. You could not find a more negative demonstration of the words in Fresh Start about how decisions were to be taken than the process used for the Budget.

I have concerns that the Finance Minister is seeking solely a narrative around blaming the UK Government for our financial situation because of the way in which they have addressed the UK deficit. Of course that is a factor, and we have to lobby them in that regard. However, if that allows us to take our eye off the ball in the reforms that have to take place in Northern Ireland, we will miss a major opportunity to put our finances back on a strategic footing.

I am concerned, for example, that we are not planning ahead sufficiently for a lower rate of corporation tax. I agree that the Minister needs to clarify the Executive's position. Is it, as Emma Little Pengelly suggested, definitely happening in 2018, or is it, as the Minister suggested, subject to affordability? Those are contradictory statements. One is right; one is wrong. Please tell not just the Assembly but the business community of Northern Ireland and internationally what our plans are for it.

It is not just about having certainty about what is happening but about investing in skills and infrastructure, and no steps are being taken to turn the tap on in the right direction. In particular, the skills funding deficit will be approaching £85 million per annum by 2019-2020. We have to step up in that regard. We are not addressing the cost of a divided society. A report from Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre, which is gathering dust on the shelf, points to major distortions in our public spending. We are well aware of distortions in health and education spending at present. We have got to grips with serious reform in that area. I am concerned that there is an intent to spend, potentially, an extra billion pounds a year on health by 2021, which the DUP and Sinn Féin have signed up to. That will not be credible or sustainable. We have to look at what reforms are required and put money behind them rather than simply making a pledge about resource input, especially if we do not consider any other reforms. For some Departments and agencies, that will potentially mean cuts as high as 20%.

I know that the Minister will say, "Well, it is all and well good for you to say all these things, but where is the alternative? Where are the different proposals for how you would do things differently?" Let me set out a few things. Maybe my colleagues will explore these in more detail, and I will touch on them tomorrow. For example, we believe that we should cancel the social investment fund; Departments can carry on that work. We should cancel the relocation of DARD to Ballykelly, as it is costing us money, we do not need to do it, and it will create massive issues for business continuity. We should address teacher training. I am flabbergasted that Mr Smith referred to the inefficiencies in teacher training when his party overruled me at the Executive when I tried to do something about it. We need to end rates capping and prescription charges. There also needs to be some modest increase in the regional rate. All those things could be done this year by the Executive.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Dr Farry: That is an alternative, so do not say that we have not put one forward.

Mr Bell: What the public in Northern Ireland are principally looking at is what devolved government can deliver to them in excess of what was there before. There is a record there that, I think, is indisputable. We have brought more jobs to Northern Ireland than at any time before, and we have looked at foreign direct investment into Northern Ireland. For years, we were told that Northern Ireland was at its high watermark and that we had achieved more foreign direct investment per head of population, with the exception of London, and that was fine because nobody could compete against the city of London and the London economy. Yet, in about August 2014, Northern Ireland, per head of its population, exceeded London in attracting more foreign direct investment than any other part of the United Kingdom. Significantly, for periods, our unemployment rate has been very attractive in comparison with the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

1.30 pm

There are major challenges ahead for all of us. What can we do? Yes, we have the Fresh Start Agreement. Incidentally, I welcome the fact that we have an Opposition of sorts and that they are looking towards scrutiny, but, ultimately, the scrutiny came in the last number of weeks at the election. Mr Smith said that it was "Vote Arlene", but it was also "Vote Mike" and others. The scrutiny came from the electorate, Mr Smith, and they voted Arlene Foster in as the First Minister of Northern Ireland with an overwhelming mandate and gave Mike and your party its lowest share ever. Ultimately, all of us elected politicians look to the scrutiny of the electorate.

We have major challenges at this time. I look specifically towards the Department for Communities. In the last year of the previous mandate, I attended a manufacturing event at Queen's University led by the previous acting vice chancellor, Professor James McElroy, where he outlined that, according to figures he got from the United Nations, I believe, Belfast was the second-safest city in the world and second only to Tokyo. So we are attracting record levels of foreign direct investment. We have a safe place. We have an education system in Northern Ireland that, as a rule of thumb, is 10% higher than its competitor areas,

and we have a strong further and higher education sector that, in many cases, is leading the world. But there are major challenges.

There are challenges with housing. We have seen some good news recently in the social housing sector. We have to look not only towards the successes but at the fact that a huge number — too many people — are waiting in the social housing sector. I raised the point and laboured it at the Committee, and I will raise it again. I am particularly concerned about the numbers of people in our social housing sector who do not register in the homeless figures. They are living in substandard accommodation that none of us in the House would accept. I can bring you to a house in Newtownards, where there is a single mother with a number of children, and she cannot sleep in her own bedroom. Ards and North Down Borough Council has been out, and environmental health has been out. They have said, "Yes, this is unacceptable", but a private landlord is challenging that and saying, "Oh, we can get a plumber to do something different from what is being asked for". Meanwhile, the single mother lives in a house that is unacceptable but does not appear in the homelessness figures because she is apparently in suitable accommodation even though the council has been out and deemed it unsuitable. We have levels of hidden homelessness that we must address, and we have to look towards the reform of social housing and how we can actively help people in the private rented sector.

Urban regeneration will be a major challenge, but we also look on the back of the sporting achievements, not only the challenges that there were last night, albeit in the context of a tragic death, but we can see out there that Northern Ireland sport is again playing at the top level, and we look towards major events that are coming in. The Irish Open will be here again in 2017, as will The Open, the world's largest golf tournament, in 2019. How can we use our sport to help in such areas as autism awareness, sports injury and concussion, and the Special Olympics? Those are all challenges in our Budget.

We have to find suitable employment for people. That is about helping them to find employment and to make sure that they, particularly our young people, have the right careers guidance for where they want to progress in the future.

There are challenges in our world-class natural heritage, in benefits and pensions, in supporting children and in local government. All in all,

those are challenges that we must rise to because we have to create more jobs and increase family incomes in Northern Ireland. We have to look towards a world-class health service and to seeing what we have continue to develop. We need a proper infrastructure in Northern Ireland to support that. Finally, we need to do two things. First, we need to protect family budgets. We need to keep as much money as we can —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Bell: — in families' homes. We also need to build on education not just for the top who are achieving but for those who are underachieving.

Mr McElduff (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): Go raibh maith agat as iarradh orm labhairt sa díospóireacht seo. To begin, there is some good news, in that the overall education resource figure has increased. That is obviously a positive. It is a considerable sum of around £35 million, which has been added to the 2016-17 baseline to meet substantial additional liabilities associated with teachers' pensions. In addition, the cost base for schools has reduced by perhaps around £12 million — that is my understanding — owing to voluntary staff departures. There is considerable expectation that other money, perhaps in the region of £20 million, will be allocated to education in June monitoring, with £15 million for school budgets and, hopefully, £5 million for special educational needs.

There is less good news — bad news — in the additional pressures that schools find themselves under. Those arise in the first instance from a reduction by the Westminster Government in the National Insurance rebate for employers. That decision may cost schools in the region of £1,000 per teacher. That is a worrying situation for those who manage school budgets. The other pressures include a possible increase in teachers' pay, which if it happens may generate £10 million of extra costs to schools for every 1% rise in teachers' salaries. That is clearly a very challenging situation for schools. The solution may well come in a number of parts, including extra money from the Executive, further reductions in the school cost base and, in some but not all cases, a new approach by schools to excessive budget surpluses.

I turn now to the capital programme, which has increased to £193.4 million. That increase is, of course, welcomed by the Committee. I think most Members will be aware of school

enhancement programme work and so-called minor works in their constituency that have either been completed or need to be completed or undertaken. Members will also be aware of some major works, for example, new school buildings, that have been promised but not yet delivered. The Department now has a full pipeline of capital works of all kinds and in all sectors. The Committee hopes that we will see progress on all those projects or areas of projects in 2016-17.

It is also worth noting that up to another £50 million per year of capital will be available for shared and integrated education projects under the Fresh Start Agreement. I know that the predecessor Committee took an active interest in shared education projects in Ballycastle, the Moy, Limavady, Brookeborough and Toomebridge. I am sure that Committee members past and present and all Members will generally welcome progress on those projects

It is also worth mentioning that the Department raised concerns recently that it might be unable to spend all of the Fresh Start money on education projects, as planned. In the Finance Minister's response today, I would like the Aire Airgeadais to give the House some assurance that that money will not be wasted if that is the case. I would like him to indicate, if possible, whether some of the Fresh Start money might find its way to supporting other innovative shared education projects, like that under construction at Strule in Omagh.

I wish to add a few comments as a Sinn Féin MLA and a West Tyrone MLA. One thing I would like the Executive and the Minister of Finance to be aware of at all times is the whole area of rurality. We have rural proofing and the Rural Needs Bill, but on the ground those need to translate into the remedying and repair of rural roads, particularly B- and C-class roads, where possible. There is also the area of inadequate rural broadband. Coming fresh out of the Assembly election campaign in West Tyrone, I know that those are two very serious messages coming from the people: rural roads and rural broadband. I will probably repeat those quite often in this mandate, in the hope that we see major progress in those two areas. At the end of the day, roads are about people more than they are about roads themselves. If you have poor broadband in a community, it definitely curtails the competitiveness of small businesses. It prevents farmers from completing forms online and prevents young people from social interaction.

I also throw into the mix a priority of additional respite for adult carers of those with learning

disability. That is a health matter, but an essential matter that needs to be mentioned today.

From a constituency point of view and marrying it with my education role, I met nine school principals from the Omagh district last week. I was accompanied by two other MLAs from the constituency. We heard the message loud and clear from the nine principals about the pressure on school budgets, perhaps leading to unacceptably large class sizes and more teacher redundancies. There is a protocol — obviously, the Minister of Education has the primary role in addressing that issue — but I invite the Minister of Finance to also be cognisant and aware at all times of the pressures coming on school budgets and perhaps to give a listening ear to school principals, if that is not to usurp the role of the Education Minister.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. Will he bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McElduff: I certainly will. Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the chance to speak.

Mr Nesbitt: I congratulate Philip Smith, my colleague from Strangford, on the impressive delivery and insightful contents of his maiden speech. "Insightful" is not a word you could direct towards the Estimates, however, whose 338 pages give very little away.

Before focusing on the scant information about the Executive Office, I turn to the opening remarks of the Minister. I welcome him, and wish him every good fortune for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. We were promised scrutiny. I notice that he chose to refer to the Ulster Bank's purchasing managers' index but used the April report to suggest that we had had 12 months of progress. I am sure the Minister is aware that the May index was published earlier today. He chose not to use it. Is that because the headline included the words "nine-month low" and the commentary included the opinion that Northern Ireland's brief period of outperforming the rest of the UK as a whole appears to have come to an end? I hope he addresses that in his closing remarks.

In terms of the Executive Office and the Estimates, there are some clues — let me be positive — because it lists a number of areas where money will be required. They include settlement of the Civil Service equal pay claims.

That was a big issue on the doorsteps in Strangford during the election and, I have no doubt, in the Minister's constituency of South Belfast. Public servants were disadvantaged because they were not made aware of the implications when they agreed to secondments to the Northern Ireland Office or to the old Police Authority of Northern Ireland. This has dragged on and has gone through the courts. First Ministers have talked about feeling a moral obligation to those who missed out through no fault of their own. I invite the Minister to make an unambiguous and time-bound commitment to remove this stain from the Executive.

1.45 pm

There is very little information in the Estimates about the historical institutional abuse inquiry, but the Minister will know that Sir Anthony Hart is due to report to the Executive no later than January, within this financial year. The Minister will know that victims and survivors have waited not years but decades for relief and for an apology and that, increasingly, there is a call for reparation. For many, reparation is synonymous with financial compensation. They have welcomed the fact that the chair, Sir Anthony Hart, has said that he will recommend some form of reparation, but there is no budget line in the Estimates for the historical institutional abuse inquiry to lead on to reparation in the form of financial compensation. Again, I ask the Minister to address that. I understand that other organisations such as the institutions may be called on to contribute, having contributed to the abuse in the first place, but I do not think that that is any reason for the Executive not to lead and make provision and then reclaim the money from other organisations that may be deemed to have responsibility.

Mrs Little Pengelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: I will give way to the Chair of the Committee for Finance.

Mrs Little Pengelly: The Member spoke to the point that I was going to raise. I am sure that he will agree that many of the admissions thus far to the HIA inquiry have come from the institutions as opposed to the Government. It is only right and proper that they make a suitable contribution towards that. Likewise, given that we are waiting for the independent report from the independent inquiry, having a budget line to outline redress from the Government would, in fact, prejudice the outcome of that. We need to

be extremely careful to maintain the independence of the independent inquiry.

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

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you very much. I do not accept the Member's point: if you are 70, 80 or 80-plus years of age, you expect your Government to do the right thing by you. The niceties of maintaining the independence of Sir Anthony Hart and his inquiry are not compromised if the Executive say, "We will put in a budget line that we may or may not draw down when we finally receive the report of Sir Anthony". On those issues, let us not forget that there are many victims who do not have access to the inquiry, not because they were not victimised and were not abused — they were abused, arguably in exactly the same way, physically and psychologically, as the victims who have access to Sir Anthony's inquiry — but because of geography. It is because they were abused not in an institution but perhaps in a domestic setting. I ask the parties, particularly those that are for equality, this question: where is the equality in saying, "Because you were abused in location A, you get into the inquiry, but someone else, abused in location B, does not"? That is not a matter of equality.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: Briefly.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member giving way. Will he confirm that the Ulster Unionist Party agreed to the terms of reference of the historical abuse inquiry?

Mr Nesbitt: Yes, we did, and the legacy Committee agreed to it because we were told that, if we tried to keep reopening the terms of reference of the inquiry, we would hold it back. It was better to go with this inquiry for those who could get access to it and put pressure on the Executive to do something for those who were excluded. I thank the Member for that clarification opportunity.

I see in the Estimates over £6 million for the social investment fund. That money should not be there, not because the social investment fund was not a good idea but because the timeline was a disaster. The information that we have is that the £80 million that should have been spent in total by March 2015 will not now be spent until financial year 2019-2020: a five-year overrun for a three-year programme.

What about childcare? There was £12 million for OFMDFM in the previous mandate, and I believe that it spent only something like £4.6 million. Where is the £7.5 million? He can oppose austerity coming out of London, but does the Minister accept that about £100 million of programme money in OFMDFM not being spent added to austerity rather than eased it?

I have one other point. The Executive talk about moving away from the silo mentality between Departments, but, as I said to the First Ministers when they were before the Committee last Wednesday, our scrutiny Committees are not doing so. We are still in silos, and that sometimes makes it difficult to scrutinise programmes such as Delivering Social Change, where the lead may be with the Executive Office but the delivery is with another Department. The Assembly has to think about how we achieve non-silo working in our Committees as well as in the Executive.

Mr Farry attacked my colleague Philip Smith by saying that the Ulster Unionist Party overruled a proposal from him on the Executive. Simple maths for Mr Farry: his party had two votes on the Executive, while we had one. How on earth can one vote overrule two?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Nesbitt: This man was in charge of further and higher education.

Mr Stalford: This is an interesting debate. It takes place in the context of the Fresh Start Agreement, which secured greater investment from central government for Northern Ireland than would have been the case had it not happened. We are therefore debating how a pie that has, frankly, become larger should be sliced up inside government, and that is a welcome context for the discussion.

Reference has been made in the debate to the social investment fund. My experience of it, from my time as a council representative for south Belfast, has been a good one. Other South Belfast representatives can confirm that the projects in our constituency that the social investment fund will be directed into are of benefit to people on the ground.

Ms Hanna: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Yes.

Ms Hanna: The Member has brought this up before. Nobody is suggesting that there is not

social need out there or that there are not problems that need to be solved. The Member needs to accept that people are critical because it is an invite-only scheme — only preferred suppliers and organisations have the opportunity to tender for the work. Nobody wants to take the money away from the early years schemes that you refer to, but do you not agree that any organisation with ideas and solutions should equally be allowed to apply for the money and deliver the solution?

Mr Stalford: This is the second time that the Member has repeated that inaccuracy. The Member knows that the working groups appointed to oversee the social investment fund were appointed in an open and transparent way. She also knows that the Office of the First and deputy First Minister had no hand in determining which projects would and would not be approved. That decision fell to the panel in each area, and those panels were appointed independently.

It is really sad that, as a Member for South Belfast, you cannot find it in yourself to recognise the positive impact that the social investment fund is having in our constituency, particularly in Sandy Row, where the money from the fund will go towards the creation of a training and employment centre. It is an area of great social need, and it needs that. I think of Taughmonagh, where the money from the social investment fund will provide a day-care nursery in an area of social deprivation — somewhere where it is needed. An important point about the Taughmonagh day-care nursery is that it is used by people who are from way beyond the confines of Taughmonagh — by people from throughout South Belfast. Those are projects that are bringing positive benefits and creating positive change in our constituency, and I know —

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: No. Later on maybe, but I want to make some progress.

I know that there has been a lot of criticism directed at the social investment fund, but we can see for ourselves, with our own eyes, the positive impact that it is having on the ground.

Reference was made to the historical abuse inquiry.

It is not right to refer to the need to maintain the independence of the inquiry as merely a "nicety". If parties agreed the terms of reference, as they did, and the way in which it

would proceed, as they did, we should allow it to proceed. I agree with the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party that the horror that those people who were abused went through is beyond measure, and we, as a Government, are right to recognise that horror for what it was. It is because we recognised it for being the horror that it was that the inquiry was established in the first place. It is because of the need to ensure that we move forward together united to address this injustice that all parties that were then around the Executive table agreed that this was the way to proceed. Having initiated the thing, we should not suddenly decide that we want to alter the terms of reference or interfere with the independence of the inquiry.

We are in a better position. Northern Ireland is in a better position than it was before the Fresh Start Agreement because of the additional resources that have been secured for spending on things that matter to every person, whether they are in the Government or the Opposition. It is on that basis that we should continue the discussions. We should, of course, refine our Programme for Government at later points to ensure that maximum delivery occurs for our people. In those two areas — the social investment fund and the historical abuse inquiry — it is important that we try, insofar as is possible, to maintain a unity of purpose to ensure delivery, not only for the communities that need it but for the individuals who have been so badly affected by the despicable behaviour of others.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest the House take its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mark Durkan.

The debate stood suspended.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Speaker: We will start with listed questions. Before I call Mrs Sinead Bradley, I inform the House that question 4 has been withdrawn.

Executive Meetings: Minutes

1. **Mrs S Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why the officially recorded minutes of Executive meetings are not published or made available to all Members. (AQO 1/16-21)

Mr McGuinness (The deputy First Minister):

It is essential for the Executive to be able to conduct their work in an environment where Ministers can engage in full and frank discussion and be confident that the content of their papers and their views are protected. We do not, therefore, routinely release information, including minutes of meetings, that provides details of Executive business or their decision-making processes. The Executive may, however, where they consider it appropriate, make a statement on their decisions or views on a particular issue. We have no plans to depart from that practice.

Mrs S Bradley: Thank you, Minister, for your reply. Will you explain why the two parties represented by the First Minister and deputy First Minister at last week's Business Committee did an about-turn on a fully crafted and agreed position of all five parties in March 2016 on the provisions for Opposition debate on the Floor of the Assembly? Did that about-turn perhaps happen after —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to come to a question.

Mrs S Bradley: — two Opposition debates?

Mr McGuinness: The question specifically refers to the decisions and minutes of meetings of the Executive. During the course of the conversations that we have, we always think it valuable that Ministers have the ability to engage in discussions to enable outcomes that make sure that we are in a position to provide better government as we move forward.

The work of the Business Committee is obviously the responsibility of that Committee, but it has been made abundantly clear that we regard the position that we have adopted, in the

conduct of our business and how we relate to the Assembly, as being appropriately suited to the outcome from the Fresh Start Agreement.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for those remarks. Does he accept that a lack of transparency, perhaps mixed with not a very timely disclosure of ministerial information, often leaves senior civil servants in an impossible position, not least when they try to brief Statutory Committees?

Mr McGuinness: It is always our commitment to ensure that, when civil servants attend Committees, they are in a position to provide as much information as they possibly can. It does not take me to remind people that, during the course of the last mandate, we had a situation where we had a five-party coalition. People talk about transparency; many meetings of the Executive took place where at least two of the parties had no difficulty whatsoever with stepping outside of the protocols and briefing the media on the confidential business of the Executive.

Mr Ford: I am quite sure that the deputy First Minister was not referring to Stephen Farry or me in his last comment. Given what he has just said about the releasing of information from the Executive, the complexity of the work to be done around the Programme for Government framework and the subsequent development of the Programme for Government, particularly where it relates to cross-departmental issues, will the deputy First Minister inform us of how Members of the House and its Committees will be involved in that process?

Mr McGuinness: I thank the Member for the support that he and his party gave to the approach that we have adopted during the course of the Programme for Government. It is absolutely clear that that work, which began last year, was supported the whole way through by the Alliance Party. In the aftermath of its decision not to come into the Government on this occasion, it stood by its commitment to process a Programme for Government draft that had at its heart the responsibility to engage with the community, society and key stakeholders.

I appreciate that contribution. As we go forward in processing the work of the Programme for Government, we will take into account the point that the Member just made. I think it is vitally important, as we go forward, that we share as much information as is feasible.

The Executive Office: Roles and Priorities

2. **Mr McGrath** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the roles and priorities of their Department between now and 2021. (AQO 2/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: In determining the roles and priorities of the Executive Office over this mandate, we will be looking to the contribution we can make to the high-level outcomes in the Executive's Programme for Government. A draft framework for the programme was agreed by the Executive on 26 May 2016 and was published the following day for public consultation. It contains 14 strategic outcomes that, taken together, the Executive believe articulate the society we wish to have. Those outcomes are supported by 42 indicators that are clear statements for change. A key feature of the new programme will be its dependence on collaborative working, and we will, therefore, be working as part of the Executive team to deliver that programme and drive work across departmental and sectoral boundaries.

During the period of public consultation, we will continue to deliver against our statutory responsibilities and existing plans, undertaking important work in equality, human rights and social change; building a united community; strategic investment and regeneration; our relationships with others, North/South and east-west, and with Europe; and promoting our interests abroad. None of that work is going to stop, but we will be looking in the new Programme for Government at ways to do things better, taking a more joined-up approach with our stakeholders and partners and finding ways that will deliver the greatest benefits.

Mr McGrath: Could the Minister explain whether, given the reduced responsibilities of his Department, it is still justified in having two Ministers, two junior Ministers, a fleet of ministerial cars and the largest collection of special advisers that our Government has? Are there any plans to reduce that burden on our taxpayers?

Mr McGuinness: The answer is yes, it is justified.

Mr Kennedy: In originally looking at the reduction in the number of Departments, the idea had been for the Executive Office to move to a coordinating role, rather than one of service delivery. Can I ask the Minister this: what changed?

Mr McGuinness: I think we still regard the coordinating role as very important, but given that we are now in a two-party coalition, it is a huge responsibility — it is a responsibility that we and the DUP have taken up against a backdrop of others opting out — to ensure that we continue to give leadership. It falls primarily to the First Minister and me to ensure that the work of all our Departments is coordinated in a way that ensures delivery. Of course, our responsibilities are greater than the work that happens at the Executive. There are other responsibilities that we have, such as meeting delegations and people who come here on an ongoing basis. The whole business of the work of government basically now falls, in the leadership involved in taking it forward, to the DUP and Sinn Féin and specifically to the First Minister and me.

Mr Boylan: Will the Minister confirm that other parties had an opportunity to develop the draft framework? Was there any objection to that in principle?

Mr McGuinness: We have been over that a number of times over recent weeks. It is on the public record that the DUP, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party stood by the commitments that we made to put in place a Programme for Government that had the widest possible consultation and involved key sectors from within society and the community that wished to contribute. This was a different approach. It has worked successfully in some of the states of the United States, Scotland and Finland. From our perspective, we believe it represented the best way forward.

It was also supported by key people within the stakeholder section who came out very publicly and said that they agreed with this approach and that it was an opportunity for them to have the greatest possible input to the Programme for Government. It is vital that we continue to process that in a way that gives us the best possible outcomes, and one in which society can be satisfied that they have had their opportunity to have their say. The fact that other parties stood back from that and disavowed the commitments that they made at the beginning — specifically one other party, I should say: the SDLP — is a matter for it. The SDLP was fully engaged in the process from the beginning, and it was only in the aftermath of the election, not before the election — at no stage before the election did it voice any disagreement with the approach that was being adopted — that it disagreed with the process. I believe that that was down to its election results.

Mr Dickson: Deputy First Minister, in light of the recent United Nations report which highly criticised the segregated nature of our education system, can you assure the House that integrated education will receive the highest priority when it comes to considering Together: Building a United Community?

Mr McGuinness: I, as well as many other Members, absolutely value the contribution that integrated education makes. Of course, I think there are many other sectors that make an incredible contribution to an education system that has seen dramatic improvements in recent years, with increasing numbers of young people emerging from school with five or more GCSEs. I think the United Nations report that came out over the weekend is a very, very important report that should be studied by every Member of the House.

Brexit: Contingency Plans

3. **Mr Aiken** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline any contingency plans their Department has in place should the UK decide to leave the European Union. (AQO 3/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: An exit from the European Union is not a certainty. It will be negotiated only if the public vote to leave in the referendum on 23 June. The British Government have indicated that they are not planning on that basis. We will also await the outcome of the June referendum.

Mr Aiken: In view of the concerns raised by the Northern Ireland business community, Northern Ireland business organisations and many of the political parties in the Assembly, including his party, will the deputy First Minister be in discussion with his other governmental party about looking closely at what the implications of a Brexit vote may be and what support a Brexit vote may raise? Will he then formally take the opinion and view of the Chamber and, on behalf of all the Government, represent that view to the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr McGuinness: I think that, by this stage, the views of all the parties in the Assembly are well known. I do not think our partners in the Government have any difficulty in understanding our position in relation to the referendum. We are very firmly in the "Remain" camp, for all of the reasons that the Member has articulated. Obviously, our partners in the Government have a different view. This is a democracy; people are entitled to their view. I very strongly hold to the view that any decision

to leave the European Union would be hugely detrimental to society, our business community, our farming community and the community and voluntary sector. I also note that people say there will be no checkpoints on the borders in the event of a Brexit. This morning, on social media, I saw a photograph that somebody had put up of the border that exists between Norway and the European Union. Do I want to see checkpoints on the roads from Derry to Letterkenny, from Tyrone to Monaghan and from Newry to Dundalk? Certainly not.

Ms Hanna: It is interesting that the deputy First Minister noted that he would wait to see the outcome of the election before setting a hard course. That is a good idea; it is a pity nobody else is allowed to do that. In the disastrous event of a Brexit, which powers that are currently with the European Union does he see being devolved to Northern Ireland? Has he done an audit of those powers? Which would usefully come to the Assembly?

Mr McGuinness: People are jumping to a position regarding the referendum. The referendum has not yet been held. It will be held on 23 June. I do not know what the outcome will be. I hope that it is a vote to remain.

In the context of the debate thus far, there are so many unknowns about what will happen on the other side of the referendum, and we will have to deal with them, whatever they are. If, unfortunately, we end up in that scenario, there will be a two-year position with regard to negotiating a way forward, and I presume there will be a lot of negotiations in that period. However, I am not working on the basis of this being a Brexit vote; I am working on the basis of it being a "Remain" vote.

2.15 pm

Mr McAleer: The Minister obviously agrees that an exit would have a massive impact here in the North of Ireland, given our particular circumstances.

Mr McGuinness: I think that we all understand that any such vote would have a massive impact. We have had the debate. Obviously, we represent only a very small percentage of the overall number of people entitled to vote, but I think we can say, without fear of contradiction, that, at the moment, given the support from the SDLP, the Alliance Party, the Ulster Unionists and us, the hope is that the majority of people in the North will vote to remain. If so, we will stand proudly with

Scotland, which I believe will vote to remain. However, the big vote will be in England, as many of us know. It is not a situation over which we have any control. I will be in England later this week, making a speech outlining the implications of all of this for us. I hope that people in Britain, particularly the Irish community, will recognise the great dangers for our economy and social interaction, North and South.

Mr Agnew: The deputy First Minister mentioned the possibility of border checks. Does he agree that the "Leave" campaign cannot have it both ways? They argue, on the one hand, that they will control the borders and reduce immigration and, on the other, say that we will not have a border checkpoint. Does he agree that we should protect the free movement of people and that the "Leave" campaign should be honest and admit that, if they want to control the borders, that will mean having checkpoints?

Mr McGuinness: I listened to Nigel Lawson's interview on 'The Andrew Marr Show' a couple of weeks ago, and he gave the game away very clearly. He was emphatic in his belief that there would have to be checkpoints. The fact that we have seen, this morning, the photographs of checkpoints that exist between Norway and the rest of the European Union adds validity to his argument. He is not the only person who has said that.

It has to be a source of great concern to all of us who, I think, have all benefited from the open border. You can now drive from central Belfast to central Dublin in an hour and a half or an hour and three quarters without hitting a red light or a checkpoint. I think that the last thing people here want to see — particularly people in the business community and those who socialise regularly, as is happening increasingly as the peace process develops — is anything that in any way interferes with the very important social interaction, North/South or, indeed, east-west.

Mr Allister: If the people of the United Kingdom have the wisdom to unshackle us from the disastrous EU, is there an assurance that the deputy First Minister and his party will not seek to stymie the opportunities to liberate business, including farming, from costly regulation, will not stand in the way of the resulting bonfire of regulation and will not stand in the way of the rebirth of our fishing industry?

Mr McGuinness: Well, I think I represent a very responsible political party in this Assembly. The Member may not think so, but I certainly

think so. In the aftermath of the vote, whatever the outcome, we will behave very responsibly indeed. It is hugely important that we all recognise the seriousness of what is about to happen. The Member takes a different view from mine, but, again, he is entitled to that opinion. Whatever happens on the other side of the vote, we, behaving responsibly, will deal with our partners in government and other parties in the House to ensure that we continue to move our society forward.

Mrs Long: Like the deputy First Minister, I hope that the vote will be to remain. However, regarding contingency plans, has he or, indeed, the First Minister received any assurance from the UK Government that the money that we currently receive from the EU into Northern Ireland would be replaced by money from Westminster were we to go through the process of withdrawing from the EU?

Mr McGuinness: The answer to that is no. Neither the First Minister nor I has received any assurance whatsoever. Even if we had, I would not trust it for one minute. This is a British Government that were ruthless in dealing with our block grant over the period that they were in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. I have absolutely no faith whatsoever that whatever money is lost through single farm payments, the CAP or anything else will be returned to us by a British Government that are totally and absolutely committed to austerity.

Mr Poots: Does the deputy First Minister recognise that removing the United Kingdom from Europe would bring many more powers back to the Assembly, and, instead of having unelected commissioners making decisions that impact on the lives of the people, the Assembly would be making those decisions and bringing about a far greater level of democracy for the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr McGuinness: My position is the same as that of my party, which is one of critical engagement with the European Union. Not everything about the European Union is hunky-dory, and we have articulated our concerns about different aspects, some of which the Member referred to in his remarks. However, we have to deal with the impact of a Brexit vote on how we develop our economy. Of course, as the Member will know, over the course of my dealings with Rev Ian Paisley — God rest him — Peter Robinson and Arlene Foster, then as the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and now as First Minister, our visits to the United States were hugely important in attracting more foreign direct investment and

jobs than at any other time in the history of the state. For all the delegations, through the access that we had courtesy of the then Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, to the highest levels of the business community in the United States, the issue of our continuing involvement in Europe always came up.

One of the big difficulties that we face in the context of any Brexit vote will be how that will have an impact on our ability to attract foreign direct investment, given that one of the major arguments that we used was that we were a near-shore location for a jump-off into the European Union. There are huge implications for us from this vote, and I hope that, in its aftermath, the wisdom of the people will come through and that they will recognise that the great benefits, particularly for us, are ones that we should not spurn.

The Executive Office: Staff

5. **Mr Beggs** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the total number of staff employed by their Department. (AQO 5/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Fearon to answer the question.

Ms Fearon (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): As of 1 June 2016, the total number of staff employed by the Executive Office was 284.

Mr Beggs: Each of the nine departmental Ministers has a special adviser, and many of the direct functions that were in OFMDFM have now transferred out. Given that transfer of functions, how can the First Minister and the deputy First Minister continue to justify the increase in special advisers that they instigated? Will there be a reduction below the original six, given the reduction in functions?

Ms Fearon: I thank the Member for his question. There are no plans to reduce the numbers of special advisers in the Department. I take the Member's point, but, although the Executive Office is now more streamlined following the restructuring of Departments, it still covers a wide range of functions, and the work of Ministers has not reduced in the office. Much of our work also facilitates the business of the Executive and of other Ministers and their Departments. We remain a key strategic driver across the Executive, and that requires a lot of detailed work.

The Department continues to have responsibility for issues of significant political and cross-community interest, as well as for a number of key priority areas for the Executive.

Structures and staffing levels in the Department are regularly reviewed to ensure that work is delivered in the most efficient and effective way possible.

Mr McMullan: What have been the reduction in staff numbers and the savings to the Executive Office arising out of the voluntary exit scheme?

Ms Fearon: I thank the Member for his question. The voluntary exit scheme resulted in a reduction of eight posts in the legacy Department, OFMDFM. The last person exited in tranche 4 at the end of March this year. All reductions were achieved prior to the formation of the Executive Office. In-year paybill savings realised as a result of the voluntary exit scheme amounted to £104,000, with ongoing anticipated annual savings of £336,000.

Ms Mallon: I find it interesting that our deputy First Minister does not trust the Tories when it comes to Europe but left our most vulnerable in their hands when it came to welfare reform.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Mallon: In light of the number of functions that have transferred out of the office, can the junior Minister detail the savings to the public purse from the reduction in staff?

Ms Fearon: I thank the Member for her question. I do not have the budgetary details with me, but I am more than happy to write to her. I will say, however, that, with the transfer of functions, 56 posts went from OFMDFM to other Departments.

Legislative Programme

6. **Mr Agnew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration they have given to publishing a legislative programme. (AQO 6/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: As the Member will be aware, we recently issued for consultation a draft Programme for Government framework, which sets the direction for the Executive for the next five years. By the end of this year, we intend to have detailed plans in place for delivering our intended outcomes. It is therefore essential that the Executive's legislative proposals for this mandate should reflect and support the

priorities in the Programme for Government and be developed in tandem with this process. While we acknowledge fully the need to advise the Assembly of our legislative proposals, this cannot be done in isolation from the wider development of the Programme for Government, and we will give further consideration to the timing and most appropriate means of providing this information.

Mr Agnew: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. A lot of work has gone into looking at how to make the Assembly operate better. Members are only too well aware of the flurry of legislation towards the end of the last mandate, meaning perhaps that some very complex Bills did not get the time and attention that they deserved. What guarantee can the deputy First Minister give that we will produce legislation in a more managed, strategic way, rather than in a rush at the end of the mandate?

Mr McGuinness: In the previous mandate, 60 of the 64 Executive Bills introduced were passed by the Assembly, following a huge effort by Members, Ministers and Committees, particularly from January to March of this year. That was comparable with the 2007-11 mandate, when 65 Executive Bills were introduced. We hope that we can build on those experiences and, taking into account what the Member has just said, learn whatever lessons need to be learned to ensure a successful outcome for the Executive's legislative programme in the current mandate. While the remit of other legislatures differs, it is nevertheless interesting to note that, compared to the 60 Executive Bills passed in the last Assembly mandate, the equivalent figure for Scotland was 67 and for Wales 25.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The deputy First Minister answered my question in his last sentence.

Mr Attwood: While acknowledging the independence of the Hart inquiry, given that Judge Hart has said that he will recommend a compensation or redress scheme for victims and survivors, which many of them have demanded, is it not time for the Executive Office to, as a minimum, scope out what a redress scheme should look like, in advance of, and complementary to, the forthcoming recommendations of the Hart inquiry?

Mr McGuinness: The Member asks a very important question. We have been guided from the get-go by Sir Anthony Hart's stewardship of the process. He has made it clear in the course of the inquiry that he believes that there will be

a need for a redress system. We take that very seriously indeed. I have no doubt whatsoever that our thoughts are turning to how we can deal with that. He also went on to say that he still has work to do. Of course, in the aftermath of this, and without attempting in any way to pre-empt the outcome of it, responsibility for redress may well fall to parties other than the Government here. It is obviously something that can be decided only by Judge Anthony Hart. At the moment, he is in the final stages of his inquiry, as the Member well knows. Hopefully we will not have too long to wait, although I think that, given what victims of abuse have been through, that is obviously not the answer that they seek at this time. I hope that all of this can be processed very thoroughly indeed, in line with Judge Hart's handling of the situation. I want to pay tribute to him for the incredible work that he has done on behalf of us all over the course of recent years.

2.30 pm

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

Fresh Start Panel Report: Publication

T1. **Mrs Dobson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister can explain why the publication of the paramilitary panel report was not announced in the Chamber. (AQT 1/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: Obviously, announcement of the paramilitary panel report fell to the First Minister and me. During the course of the Fresh Start negotiations, it certainly became quite clear to me that there was a very strong probability that, in the aftermath of the election, we would find ourselves in the Government with the DUP; effectively a two-party coalition. We were the people who asked and actually appointed the panel members. I want to put on record our deep appreciation to John McBurney, Monica McWilliams and Lord Alderdice for the very thorough work that they did. We believed that it was important, as soon as it was feasible and practicable for us, to publish the report as quickly as we could. I think that that does no injury to the right of anybody within the Assembly to have a view on that report. It is a report that, I think, has been widely welcomed by people within society. As we go forward, obviously Members have a duty, if they feel that they have a grievance about this, to raise it in the Assembly. The important thing for me is the work that they were engaged

in, the outcome of that work and the key responsibility that we now have to put in place, by the end of this month, a process for implementing it. That primarily falls to the Democratic Unionist Party, ourselves and the new Justice Minister. Parties like the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP effectively stepped away from that responsibility.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Perhaps, in future, it would be better to make such announcements, if they should definitely be made, in the House. However, we are where we are with this one. Can he provide the House with an update on the action plan following this report and when it is likely to be completed?

Mr McGuinness: We gave a commitment in the Fresh Start Agreement announcement that we would keep to the time frames that were laid out for us. The time frame for putting forward the implementation plan arising from the work of the three-person panel is that it must be completed by the end of this month. Presently, as we speak, that work is being undertaken. I can give an absolute commitment that, by the end of June, we will have kept to the public commitment that we made.

Corporation Tax: Sinn Féin Position

T2. **Ms Bunting** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the deputy First Minister's response to those who are saying that Sinn Féin is not committed to the devolution of and reduction in corporation tax. (AQT 2/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: Sinn Féin is committed to the reduction in corporation tax. At the very beginning of the debate, the five larger parties in the Assembly were absolutely in favour of such a process on the basis that we did believe, and still do believe, that it can create anything in the region of between 35,000 and 37,000 new jobs.

So, we are absolutely committed to that, but, as the Fresh Start Agreement makes clear, it has to be on the basis of affordability. We believe that it can be on the basis of affordability, so we are working on the basis that the reduced rate of corporation tax will come into being by 2018.

Ms Bunting: In the light of the deputy First Minister's answer, will he confirm that he and his party are taking and will continue to take all opportunities to sell the future prospects in

Northern Ireland after corporation tax has been reduced?

Mr McGuinness: I think I have a very strong track record in selling the need for jobs and our proposition to not only US investors in particular but to places like China and the European Union. The reality is that, over what was the worst world economic downturn that we have ever seen, the work that I was engaged in with my colleagues in government, principally from the DUP — Ian Paisley, Peter Robinson and Arlene Foster — brought in more foreign direct investment jobs than at any other time in the history of the state. So, I am absolutely committed and dedicated to providing more jobs, particularly for young people.

I think that, in all our engagements in the United States, there was intense interest in us reducing the rate of corporation tax, which is a further incentive for foreign direct investors to come. Obviously, I do not know what view those investors will take in the context of the run-in to the referendum. I think they are all sitting waiting to see what the decision of the people here and in England, Scotland and Wales will be in relation to Brexit. I do not know what their view will be on the other side of that. It amounts to another one of these unknowns, but, absolutely in principle, my view is that we need to have all the tools we possibly can have to ensure that we are continuing to show that we are open for business and are attracting new jobs for people who need them.

Orlando Shooting

T3. **Mr Aiken** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister will join the Assembly in condemning the horrific attacks in Orlando and whether he agrees that violence has no part to play in forwarding any political agenda. (AQT 3/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: I unreservedly condemn the terrible massacre that took place against innocent people in Orlando. It was an horrific crime. It again raises the whole issue that is to the fore in the United States of America about the ability of people to access weapons by just walking into a shop and purchasing them. It seems that the character who was responsible for the massacre in effect did that over the last couple of weeks.

Thankfully, we here in the North — I am reading into the question the attitude of my party, for example, in the context of all we have been through over 40 or 50 years and, more importantly, over what has been a very

important peace process that has transformed the security and political situation — are committed to totally peaceful and democratic means. We are absolutely totally committed to totally peaceful and democratic means to the point where those who are not in favour of peaceful and democratic means have threatened our lives and attacked our homes. My track record is second to none, just as it is good on attracting jobs and standing up to so-called dissident republicans and extreme loyalists who try to ferment conflict on the streets.

Mr Aiken: I thank the deputy First Minister for his views on Orlando. Will he also outline what he and his Department are planning to do to remove the scourge of paramilitarism and political violence from Northern Ireland?

Mr McGuinness: Again, on Orlando, the First Minister and I will go tomorrow to Belfast City Hall where we will jointly sign the book of condolence. I think that sends a very strong message. We have already issued a statement about it, as well as, obviously, remembering a young man, Darren Rodgers, who lost his life in an accident in France overnight. We are all absolutely gutted at that.

From our perspective, as we go forward, I think that the three-person panel has done an incredible job on our behalf. It is our task now to implement that. It is also our task to continue to show that politics works and that we as politicians, coming from different ideological backgrounds and different allegiances, have the ability, against the agreements that we have made between us over the course of the last 20 years, to continue to take our society forward. That has essentially meant that, for all of us, compromises have had to be made. I am proud of the compromises that I have been part of, and I hope that everybody else in the House attached to other political parties are proud of the compromises that they have made. That is the only hope for going forward in our society, and it is one that I believe is overwhelmingly supported by those who support the peace process.

Fresh Start: Departmental Delivery

T5. **Mr Anderson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister is confident that the reduced number of Departments, on the back of the Fresh Start Agreement, will have delivery as their focus. (AQT 5/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: I think that there has been a very wide welcome for the reduction in the number of the Departments from 12 to nine. I suppose that one of the key decisions made in the context of that exercise was the amalgamation of the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment into a new Department for the Economy. That is absolutely vital for us as we try to continue to develop our economy, particularly in relation to, hopefully, the new jobs that we believe we can attract but the huge responsibility that we have to ensure that we have people educated in the proper skills to ensure that we have the ability to attract those jobs. The big challenge for us going forward is to ensure that we support further and higher education. That will require a commitment. I have no doubt that that will be a big feature of the consultation process that we will go through over the course of the next seven weeks. The amalgamation of those two Departments represents an enormous change, which we have all signed up to and which we believe will produce economic dividends for our people.

Mr Anderson: I thank the deputy First Minister for his response and for the answers he has given to me. I think we all agree that, whatever happens, it is essential that delivery is at the forefront as we move forward over the next mandate. Does the deputy First Minister also agree with that?

Mr McGuinness: I absolutely agree; I think that delivery is of critical importance. I think that the Ministers around the Executive table from both the DUP and Sinn Féin are absolutely committed to ensuring that we deliver and are full of enthusiasm and determination to ensure that we all work collectively together. Just last week, the First Minister and I went to the new Committee for the Executive Office. We both made it clear that we do not believe that Departments working in silos is of any benefit whatsoever to us. What we need to see is a cohesive, joined-up approach, with Departments delivering on the basis of working through each other, examining what more can be done and ensuring that, as they do that, we are in a position to bring forward the processes and strategies that will be of benefit to the people whom all of us represent.

Programme for Government: Benefits for Mid Ulster

T6. **Ms Dillon** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the benefits of the draft Programme for Government for the

young people in the Mid Ulster constituency. (AQT 6/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: I hope that people in Mid Ulster — I was very proud to represent that constituency over many years; I have now obviously moved to the Foyle constituency — will engage in the consultation, just like people in each of the 18 constituencies in the North, to ensure that we get the widest possible buy-in. Of course, there has to be a big focus on young people, education, health and, indeed, our ability to attract jobs that will put those young people into gainful employment.

We could talk about the individual circumstances of an individual constituency, but I do not want to pass up the opportunity to send a very clear message to each of the 18 constituencies out there that the next seven weeks provide a golden opportunity for stakeholders and society in general to engage in a process that gives them the maximum possible buy-in on issues that affect them, not least the whole issue of our young people, our education system, our health service, our ability to attract jobs and our ability to ensure that we lead communities that are not full of despair but full of hope.

2.45 pm

Ms Dillon: Can the deputy First Minister give us a reassurance that the final draft will prioritise early intervention to give our vulnerable young people the best start in life?

Mr Speaker: I remind the Minister that he has a minute for a reply.

Mr McGuinness: It is a very valid point. It is hugely important that all the Departments that have a responsibility recognise that prevention is better than cure.

Mr Speaker: I call Carla Lockhart for a quick one. You may not get a supplementary.

Delivering Social Change: Funding Commitments

T7. **Ms Lockhart** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether all the central funding commitments in the Delivering Social Change framework, which was announced in 2012, have been met. (AQT 7/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: Delivering Social Change, which involved a range of issues, was a hugely successful process that we were involved in. It

was set up by the Executive to tackle poverty and social exclusion. The central funding for the six initial signature programmes, which were designed to tackle poverty and to improve children's health and well-being and their education and life opportunities, completed in March 2016. Of course, there are three further programmes jointly funded by Atlantic Philanthropies. All of this has been an enormous success and, until March of this year, had been fully funded.

Education

GCSE Attainment

1. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Education, given the year on year increase since 2007 in GCSE attainment, to outline his plans to ensure this improvement continues. (AQO 16/16-21)

3. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress made in raising educational attainment, particularly at GCSE level. (AQO 18/16-21)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Thank you, Mr Speaker. With your permission, I will answer questions 1 and 3 together. It is probably a slightly surreal experience that the first question that I receive is from the former Education Minister. I almost feel that I am in one of those body-swap comedies from Hollywood. While he has the opportunity, he can let me know where the money has been hidden in the Department. I would gratefully receive that information.

I welcome the improvement in GCSE outcomes detailed in the recent publication on our performance. In education, we often deal with many of the problems facing the subject matter, but we sometimes do not celebrate success and achievements. The credit for that goes to our young people, teachers and school leavers. In recent years, there has been a steady increase in the number of school leavers achieving five GCSEs or more and an improvement in the results. That has not simply happened across the board. In particular, there has been a greater speed of improvement among those on free school meals and from socially deprived backgrounds than in other sectors. While there is much work still to be done, that is to be cherished and built upon. That has occurred because of a wide range of factors, particularly the support being provided to schools. I am keen to encourage and, indeed, support particularly the school budget through a range of interventions, and I am keen

that, where we see improvements in the school system, those are protected, albeit in difficult financial circumstances. Where interventions need to happen and where the speed of improvement has not been fast enough, I am keen to see what improvements can be made.

Mr O'Dowd: I want to take this opportunity to publicly congratulate Mr Weir on his appointment as Education Minister. It is a vital role in our Executive and in our society, and I wish him every success with it. Unfortunately, I cannot tell him where the money is hidden in the Department of Education because there was no money left to hide. I know the financial pressures that he will face in the future.

Will he agree with me that education is one of those areas where it is vital that the Executive work together because many of the issues facing our young people in relation to educational underachievement are factors outside the school that impact on young people's lives outside school?

I note his comment about the increase in GCSE results for our young people. The previous Executive and the Executive before that —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to come to a question.

Mr O'Dowd: — have seen a 10% increase in GCSE results for our young people. Does the Minister agree with me that it proves that, regardless of who the local Minister is, we can do things better for ourselves?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his congratulations. Although we have seen clear success through improvements in exam results, we should always be ambitious and look to see where we can make further improvements. It is also the case that education is a key driver for the economy and society as a whole. What is most vital about education is the difference that it can make to an individual's life. For many young people, education can be the game changer in their life, and that is where we always have to think of the individual.

I certainly hope that the Executive will give priority to education. We are obviously in very difficult and tough financial circumstances, so that will not be easy. If there is any help that the Member opposite can give, it will be welcomed. If he wanted to have a word with the honourable Member for South Belfast about financing the Department of Education, I would be grateful for whatever help from whatever source it was delivered.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his answers so far and welcome him to his first Question Time. Will he give an indication of what progress has been made on raising educational attainment at GCSE level among working-class Protestant boys?

Mr Weir: Thank you. I have said that, across the board, there has been an improvement in educational attainment. That has been mirrored in a range of groups that has traditionally underachieved. If we take free school meals entitlement as a yardstick, over the past eight years, we have seen a virtual doubling of achievement in the number of Protestant boys who are entitled to free school meals. That still, however, leaves a considerable gap to the average levels of achievement.

It is noticeable, for instance, that, in both the Protestant and Catholic communities, the level of increased success among girls has appeared more rapidly than it has among boys, so there is a gender issue to be looked at as well. I will particularly be looking at where there are still weaker educational outcomes to see what interventions can be tailored for those people.

The previous Minister made a very valid point that, although we will focus on what happens in schools, there is a wide range of interventions available, and we had a debate last week on early intervention. A lot of that is critical to long-term success. Particularly in education, we need to ensure that we look at things from a long-term perspective. If you are making interventions with children who are two or three, for instance, the impact of that on exam results may well come 10 or 15 years down the line, but we should not shy away from making those interventions simply because we are not seeing the fruits of them very swiftly.

Mrs Dobson: Before the new Minister rushes to congratulate or give credit to the former Minister for improvements in GCSE results among Northern Ireland students, will he reflect on the former Minister's comments from when he was in post? He said that Northern Ireland does not have a world-class education system and:

"we remain average by Organisation for Economic Co-operation (OECD) standards, and we still have too many young people who do not achieve the expected level in literacy and numeracy." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 69, p28, col2].

John O'Dowd said that on 21 November 2011.

Mr Weir: There is always room for improvement. I should highlight the fact that the latest GCSE figures came out the morning after I became Minister. I am not passing that praise on to the former Minister but claiming it for myself. [Laughter.] I am not going to get into he-said-she-said territory. There are many successes in our education system that we need to acknowledge, but it is also the case that we have to be ambitious for our children and see where improvements can be made. I hope that the whole House can unite around that as a positive agenda rather than trying to analyse where we believe we are failing. It is about making those important improvements.

Mr Speaker: I call Mrs Sinéad Bradley. I remind Members that, if they want to ask supplementary questions, they should continually stand.

Mrs S Bradley: Minister, welcome to your first Question Time.

Does the Minister share the concern that pupil attainment may be compromised going forward owing to the reduction in the number of rewarding bodies that are available, because of changes that have been made to the grading system elsewhere?

Mr Weir: The grading issue is a separate one and I know that there are questions on that later. My aim is to try to maintain, or restore, an open market in qualifications and I have been working with officials and the key bodies to see what actions can be taken to solve that problem. It is important that the choices are there for schools and that we have an outcomes-based focus. We must ensure that, whenever pupils receive qualifications, comparability and portability are clear. It goes beyond simply qualifications; it is how pupils are able to use them in the future. That is an ongoing issue to which I hope to provide some level of certainty to the House soon. I appreciate that a lot of schools are faced with particular choices come September and it is important that, at the very least, we establish a clear direction of travel as soon as possible. I am acutely aware of the issue and have already had initial discussions with officials.

Mr Allister: Could I encourage the Minister to address that issue with some urgency? It is great to have good GCSE results but they must be relevant in that they must be portable. It is imperative for the Minister, given the disastrous decision by his predecessor, to reverse that decision at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Weir: I always take encouragement from the Member with great face, and I welcome that point from him. It is important that we get a resolution to the issue. It is not simply a matter that if the previous Minister did x then I have to go entirely in the opposite direction. The key element of this will be the outcome. The Member highlighted the significance of the comparability and portability of exam results which, for the individual student, will be the key test. That will be the basis on which I am seeking a resolution. I am acutely aware of the urgency and agree with the Member, which is why I have held initial discussions on that matter. There is a need to make progress very quickly and I hope that we can do so.

SEN Nursery Provision

2. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Education Authority's review of special educational needs nursery provision. (AQO 17/16-21)

11. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Education Authority's arrangements for consulting with those affected directly by the review of special educational needs nursery provision. (AQO 26/16-21)

Mr Weir: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will also answer Question 11 as the two questions are related.

I met with the chair and interim chief executive of the Education Authority (EA) on 7 June to address the authority's review. The chair informed me that, while good progress has been made on many aspects of the review, issues associated with the planning and provision of preschool places in special schools are complex and sensitive and will require very careful engagement with principals and parents. I emphasised the need for meaningful engagement with those who are directly affected. The chair has assured me that the review will involve the establishment of a professional practitioner group and a parent stakeholder group. It is anticipated that the review will take a further six months to complete. The authority has assured me that it will not be implementing any substantive arrangements, in terms of any review, before September 2017.

There is, however, the need for preschool places in special schools which are anticipated to increase by around 20% by September 2016. The EA has agreed to a number of interim measures to extend early years' provision across the special school sector to meet these

immediate demands. The authority has confirmed that it has engaged with the schools involved and that they are all fully aware of those plans. It advised that it is taking a careful and considered approach, with interim steps to meet the needs of children for September 2016, while planning and engaging on a longer-term approach that puts children and their needs to the forefront. I assure Members that no long-term decision on the matter will be made prior to the completion of the review. I will continue to monitor progress to ensure that the authority delivers on what it said to me and on its commitments.

Mr Lyttle: The Education Minister and the Education Authority speak of no new substantive arrangements but then outline substantive interim measures. Does the Education Minister accept that this approach is leaving parents feeling anxious and confused? Will he make clear his support for the retention of full-time hours in special educational needs nursery schools, and will he accept my invitation to meet with parents on this important matter?

Mr Weir: First, it is not universal across the board that there is full-time provision for special needs; it has been of a differential form. A range of measures has been taken. In some cases where there has been, for instance, provision of around two hours or two-and-a-half hours, that is actually extending to three hours. It is an issue of capacity and, in the interim arrangements and because of the pressures that are there, we are trying to ensure that there is a place for every child. This is the most crucial element, and I have to make that provision.

On many occasions, with children presenting because of assessments even over the summer, that figure is not finalised and we are moving on almost a daily basis in terms of increases. We are left with the interim situation of an increase of about 20%, and there is an attempt by the EA, in its primary responsibility for placements, to ensure that there are sufficient places and at least a place for every child.

3.00 pm

The Member mentioned full-time places. I am not going to prejudge the outcome of the overall review, but the key thing is trying to ensure that there is at least something in place for children in 2016; that is fairly clear. It is important that we give that level of reassurance that there is clarity around that.

I will be happy to meet parents at some stage. The initial contact, because it is the responsibility of the EA, has to be that direct conversation between the EA and parents. That is the initial contact, but I am more than happy, as part of the process, to meet representatives of parents.

Mr Speaker: I call Mrs Rosemary Barton.

Mr Weir: Mr Speaker, I think that question is linked with 11.

Mr Speaker: Sorry to the Minister. The Fresh Start Agreement and the Opposition position indicates that the first question after is to go to a member of the Opposition. Therefore, I call Mrs Rosemary Barton.

Mrs Palmer: Thank you, Mr Speaker —

Mr Speaker: OK, I call Jenny Palmer.

Mrs Palmer: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Would the Minister agree and can he give an assurance to the Assembly that we have confidence in the review of special educational needs provision at nursery level, when it has been alleged that, in March, the former Education Committee was given erroneous information by an official that Fleming Fulton nursery school was closed? Could the Minister correct the record and assure us that the existing capacity for nursery provision at Fleming Fulton is fully recognised and utilised? Will parents whose children have a statement of physical disability with associated learning needs and have expressed a preference to attend Fleming Fulton —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to come to her question.

Mrs Palmer: Would the Minister give an assurance on that?

Mr Weir: It is clear that there was wrong information given to the Committee, and the EA has entirely acknowledged that. I suppose I have an axe to grind on this in that I think I was Chair of the Committee when that wrong information was given.

In terms of confidence in the approach itself, that is why it is important that the review is not rushed and there is an opportunity, very directly, for proper engagement, particularly with parents and schools. Too often there is the allegation that consultation on any form of review or any consultation that is issued simply

becomes a tick-box exercise. It is important on this issue more than any other that that is not the case.

As regards the specifics of Fleming Fulton, it is a school that I have visited on a number of occasions. I am aware of the issues, and I know that a lot of good work is happening in Fleming Fulton.

As regards the broad position of nursery places, we are assuring people that there will be a place for every child. It is a key issue in ensuring that provision is made. Whether that will be for the exact duration that every parent wants cannot be guaranteed, because we have to make arrangements in terms of the capacity that is there. However, we will make sure that no child is left behind in ensuring that there will be. Indeed, as we move ahead with the review, it is also clear that children will have different needs. "Special educational needs" is often thrown out as just a loose term by people when it actually covers a multitude of situations. What will be of benefit to one child with special needs may not be of benefit to another. That is also something that has to be given a degree of cognisance as we move ahead with the review.

Mrs Long: The Minister will be aware that the Education Authority failed previously to disclose the opposition of parents to its proposals. I realise he has indicated that the first point of call for parents should be directly with the Education Authority, but what reassurance can he give parents that, going forward, the arrangements put in place by the Education Authority will be more open, transparent and effective in taking on board their views and reflecting them in the decision-making process than they have been to date?

Mr Weir: From that point of view, the only assurance that can be given is that we are part of a lengthy process. It is not simply being bounced through, and there are indications that the Education Authority is already starting to meet some parents and, indeed, will be trying to work through not simply professional practitioners but a stakeholder group. As indicated, there are complex issues with this, and that is why the Education Authority is taking a level of time. It is also the case that I will scrutinise what will happen, and, indeed, if there is a lack of real engagement, that is something I will bring to the Education Authority. I can only seek assurances and push people to give those assurances and then try to make sure that they are delivered in practice, but I will make sure that that is the case.

Mrs Hale: I congratulate the Minister on his first Question Time, and I thank him for coming to Dromore yesterday for the church service for Central Primary School.

Minister, you are well aware of the crushing pressures that special needs schools and statemented children in mainstream schools are under, so what action are you taking on overall funding pressures in special educational needs?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. I pass on my best wishes to Dromore Central Primary School, which had a very good day yesterday with the service to acknowledge its 78 years as a school.

As I mentioned, the figures suggest that we are in the region of a 20% increase this year in the number of children who are seeking a place in special nursery provision. Beyond that, there has been increasing demand for SEN support and associated costs; indeed, many of those things include virtuous things in our society. For instance, thankfully, some children's life expectancy has increased greatly, and that is something that we should welcome. It is also the case that the percentage of SEN pupils with a statement has increased from around 4.3% just four years ago to just under 5% now.

A significant amount of the EA's budget is spent on special education services such as special schools, specialist support services, classroom assistants and transport costs. That funding has been protected as part of the budget-setting process in the last years, and additional funding for SEN has been secured from the Executive as part of the in-year monitoring rounds. Should the EA identify budget pressures for SEN and they cannot be met within the education budget, I will continue to work with the Executive to secure additional funding. Indeed, some of those budgetary pressures were part of the monitoring round bids that we put in, and I am hopeful that the honourable Member for South Belfast will be able to deliver on those in the near future.

Mr McGrath: If the House is to have faith in any future consultations carried out by the Education Authority, will the Minister agree that, given that we have had misleading information presented to the House, we have dissatisfaction from a major stakeholder in the process — the parents — and there was a consequent extension of the deadline to the process to accommodate a different outcome, an internal investigation will be required to learn lessons from this?

Mr Weir: Where mistakes are made there is always an opportunity to learn lessons. That will be critical. Let us be clear on this: mistakes were made by the EA, particularly on the failure to give information, and I take that very seriously. The timescale is to ensure that we get a proper, robust outcome. There is a serious issue with the provision of special needs education, particularly at nursery level, and that cannot be done with simply a couple of meetings at the EA without consultation and the follow-through of a report. It has to be substantive in its nature, and it has to be carefully examined. Indeed, there is a key role for representatives of all sectors. This cannot simply be driven by officials; it has to go through the full board of the Education Authority to have that scrutiny. Most of the major parties have representatives on the board, and, indeed, there are representatives from all sectors. That sort of robust approach will, hopefully, build some level of confidence. As with any review or report, there is no guarantee that the outcome will satisfy everyone, but we have to try to ensure that we get the best possible outcome from that review.

School Enhancement Programme

4. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the school enhancement programme. (AQO 19/16-21)

Mr Weir: The school enhancement programme (SEP) is a capital build programme targeted to meet the immediate and pressing needs in schools through smaller-scale works. It caters for construction costs that will be between £500,000 and £4,000,000. Fifty-one schools were originally approved in March 2014 to benefit, at a total estimated value of £134 million, and 12 of those schemes have now been completed. Indeed, in my first week as Minister, I was able to visit one of those at Belfast High School to see the good work that had happened there. There are a further 20 projects currently on site, with another 14 approved to move to construction and expected on site over the summer. Two schemes are currently parked following completion of their design. They will move to construction as soon as funding becomes available. These are St Malachy's contract two and Our Lady's Voluntary Grammar School. The remaining five SEP schemes are continuing to advance to design completion, at which point they will also be held until capital funding becomes available.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he also give me an update on the school enhancement programme project at

Rainey Endowed School in Magherafelt in my constituency? What future funding opportunities might there be through the programme for the school?

Mr Weir: Obviously, all politics is local in the House, and I welcome the Member's interest, particularly in Rainey Endowed School. The project addresses internal refurbishment of the existing school accommodation and the replacement of old mobile classrooms with new modular classroom units. In addition, the project will have a new-build permanent physical education facility. The project has a financial director-approved cost of around £4 million that covers construction costs, professional fees, statutory charges, F and E and VAT. The contract itself is broken down into two parts. Contract one, which was commenced on site in September 2014 and completed in August 2015, provided new modular buildings to address an urgent shortfall in accommodation. The works contract was carried out by Lawrie Construction. Contract two commenced work on site in March 2016 and is due to complete in March 2017. It will provide a new sports hall and ancillary facilities. Work is being undertaken by Dixon Contractors and is progressing well. Later this week, I will, I think, have the opportunity, along with another engagement in the mid-Ulster area, to visit the school and see for myself what progress has been made.

We are also in a position where, as well as progressing the works that have already been announced, it is likely, given the success of the SEP, that there will be further calls and the opportunity for schools across Northern Ireland to make applications on a fair and competitive basis. A school's having received some level of support in the past will not preclude it from potentially receiving support in the future.

Mr McAleer: Minister, are there any new builds that could be impacted on by budgetary pressures?

Mr Weir: From a budgetary point of view, in terms of the overall SEP position, there have been a considerable number of announcements about the capital spend. Clearly there are pressures on the education budget in general, and from that point of view it is no different from any other Department. Those pressures are strongest on the resource side, and there are greater opportunities on the capital side. It will mean that there may be delays in how quickly projects move forward at times, but the opportunities are there. I have seen at first hand the advantage of SEP projects, in that their

speed of movement can be a lot greater than for a normal full-scale capital build. From that point of view, I anticipate that we will be in a position to make further calls for SEP projects.

I want to make sure that, when we get progress on those, we do not have a situation where things simply become parked and are not in a position to move forward. When announcements are made, it is important that they are followed through on.

3.15 pm

Mr McPhillips: I thank the Minister for his answers so far, and I wish him well in his new ministry. In my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, there is a great need to upgrade school infrastructure to ensure that it is fit for the 21st century. In light of that, can the Minister provide us with an update on the progress being made on the redevelopment of Mount Lourdes Grammar School and Erne Integrated College, both in Enniskillen?

Mr Weir: It may be better to write to the Member to give details on those two proposals rather than trying to fit them into a short answer. As we move ahead, all areas of Northern Ireland will be treated equally in proposals for capital build. We will have robust criteria. All Members will have a desire to see particular capital builds in their constituencies. One of the by-products of being in Dromore yesterday was my discovery that the entire departmental budget could well be blown there if I were to accede to the requests that I had yesterday. That could find favour with at least one Member here.

I will write to the Member on the detail of the two schemes he mentioned because that is better than trying to squeeze it into an extra minute.

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

Education Budget

T1. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Education, after congratulating him as a North Down colleague on his elevation to ministerial office, for his assessment of the Education budget that he inherited from his predecessor. (AQT 11/16-21)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his good wishes and I assure him that, in a similar vein of

sending good wishes, I will continue to use his shop in Groomsport. *[Laughter.]* We are in a tight financial situation. As I indicated, there are pressures on the resource budget, and those are particularly acute when it comes to schools funding. Once the monitoring round is out of the way, I will reassess the broader Education budget to see whether there is, at least in the short term, a small amount of additional money that can be allocated to ease some of the burdens in schools.

There is a wider examination that needs to take place in the broader Education budget to ensure that we are getting as much front-line delivery as possible. That will be a longer exercise because, as with a lot of things in Education and in other Departments, it is not that easy to turn things around very quickly. Undoubtedly, we are in a situation where, because of wider decisions taken within the national Budget, every Minister is trying to operate with a certain level of funding. It would be a lot easier if additional money was available to us, but we have to make do with what is there unless I am able to find the money that John O'Dowd has hidden somewhere.

Mr Chambers: Before the election, the thing that was exercising headmasters was the unplanned increase in teacher salaries, pension contributions and National Insurance contributions that had been placed as a burden on the school budgets. Has the Minister identified a solution to that? Can he give any hope to the three schools in North Down that have been waiting for a rebuild that, in the short term, they might achieve the funding for those rebuilds?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for all his questions. As regards the pressures on the pensions side, it was about £30 million. There has been a little confusion on that, because it has been built into the aggregated schools budget. The £30 million pressure came and has been mainlined within that budget. The issue of the £22 million comes from the National Insurance side of things. This is something that has hit across the public sector because of decisions that were taken at Westminster. It is undoubtedly a major stress for schools.

I am looking to see whether any additional funding can be found in the short term within the budget for 2016-17. Obviously, as part of the overall process of the monitoring round, a bid was put in. That was part of an earlier indication of around £15 million for school monitoring or the aggregated schools budget.

I will be working to ensure that, hopefully, that will be delivered. However, it is also a question of seeing whether there are any short-term actions that can be taken to ease the pressures on school budgets.

As was indicated, we are in a position in which there is heavy pressure on the resource side of capital build. Whereas I suspect that the capital budget could be spent four or five times over, there is at least less of a pressure on it because there has been a degree of protected growth in the main budget and in the additional funding for shared and integrated schooling, which is capital funding that has come separately from the Government.

There was an announcement shortly before the election that two of the schools that the Member referred to, Bangor Central and Priory, have their foot on the first rung on the ladder to getting that level of approval. Obviously, linked with Priory will be the wider Holywood schools project. I am also acutely aware of the situation at St Columbanus' and of the pressures there. There will be opportunities for bids to be put in for future funding. That will be done on an open and competitive basis. I am aware of the real needs of the school.

Education Sectors: Equal Treatment

T2. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to ensure that all education sectors are being treated equally. (AQT 12/16-21)

Mr Weir: Pupils, schools and sectors will all be treated equally as we move ahead. No schoolchild in any school should be disadvantaged simply because of the badge on the uniform. That is an important principle that I will be taking forward.

Specifically, there will be issues around area planning. Although there is good representation on some of the local groups, I will try to make sure that all the key players will be at the top table to have a say on the provision of regional area planning. It is important to get buy-in from all sectors.

One of the optimistic things that we can look forward to with the Education Authority is that all the major players in education, possibly for the first time ever, will be around the table. We have seen the establishment of the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC), which was one area in which there had traditionally been a gap. It is important that it is within the Education Authority as well.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his answer. He mentioned the Controlled Schools' Support Council. Will he give an indication of the progress that has been made on its establishment?

Mr Weir: It was agreed by the Executive in September 2014 that the council would be established. Funding has been provided since October 2014 to the working group that established the Controlled Schools' Support Council. The CSSC will receive an annual grant of around £1 million. It is expected to be operational in September 2016. Obviously, one of the first steps taken was the recruitment process for a chief executive. Interviews were held on 25 May. Somebody has been agreed for that position. The next step is the recruitment of the three second-tier senior management posts, which is due to commence shortly. It is anticipated that the chief executive and the second-tier staff will all take up post on 1 September 2016. Subject to the finalising of the lease arrangement, it is anticipated that the Controlled Schools' Support Council will be located in Stranmillis College.

Controlled Sector: Post-primary Places in Belfast

T3. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Education, after commenting that, when she previously asked questions of the Minister, it was in a much less formal setting and wishing him every success in his new role, what action he is taking to address the shortage of post-primary places in the controlled sector in Belfast. (AQT 13/16-21)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her good wishes, albeit both of us are in different roles.

Obviously, there has been pressure on school places in the controlled sector, particularly on the non-selective side of things.

That has happened both in the east of Belfast and in the northern part. Specifically, I visited the Girls' Model School on Friday and was able to have an exchange on that with some of the local representatives. There has clearly been an impact. There is a longer-term issue that will have to be looked at; in the short term, temporary variations have been sought by the Boys' Model School and by Hazelwood. I anticipate that there will be an application for a temporary variation from the Girls' Model School as well. The first two have been dealt with; they were granted, so at least there has been a degree of relieving of pressure.

However, there is also a longer-term issue that the Department will need to look at.

Ms Bunting: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he please provide an update on the long-term development opportunities for Ashfield Boys' and Girls' schools in east Belfast?

Mr Weir: There are two aspects to that. At the moment, there is no direct published development proposal for either school. However, the EA has indicated, in the annual action plan for the period up to March 2017, that it will consult on the establishment of co-education learning support centres for autism spectrum disorder, and Key Stage 3 and 4 general learning support at the schools, with the proposed effective date of 1 September 2017. As that is likely to lead to a development proposal on which, legally, I will be giving a final verdict, I cannot comment on the particular merits of that. I mentioned that there is the longer-term issue of pressure on school places. Around July of this year, the next report on area planning across Northern Ireland will be produced. That will identify, in a strategic way, where there are pressures in the system. I anticipate that that will look particularly at the position of east Belfast and also, to some extent, north Belfast. That will let us see how that issue can be taken forward in a much more long-term way.

It is not a long-term solution for any school to rely on temporary variations. It also needs to be looked at in the context of whatever pressures, opportunities and difficulties it will create for the wider school population in the area. It is not just about what will happen to an individual school.

Transfer Test: UN Report

T4. **Mr Kearney** asked the Minister of Education for his assurance that he will give due consideration to the most recent report from the United Nations, which called for the abolition of the transfer test. (AQT 14/16-21)

Mr Weir: I had a funny feeling that the Member might ask that question. The report is fairly lengthy and covers a wide range of children's services; it impacts not simply on education issues. I appreciate that it will also create a range of questions for the Justice Minister. The Department will give due and careful consideration to the report. From my initial examination of it, there are a number of aspects that I would not necessarily fully support. I take

a different view on a number of issues, not just on selection.

I have made it very clear, on the issue of selection, that I support the right of schools to select on the basis of academic ability. That is something that is now enshrined in legislation and, in many ways, from that point of view, it is something that has happened. We have different views on that issue in the House, and we might get into a sort of trench warfare as to whether we are pro- or anti-selection. There is a range of key issues in education that can make a significant difference to children's lives — particularly issues such as early intervention — where there needs to be a focus. If we get bogged down in a battle over something on which there is not going to be a degree of consensus, there is always the danger that we will ignore those other issues.

The Department will look at the full report, but that does not mean that there will be *carte blanche* agreement with it.

Mr Kearney: Mo bhuíochas duit, a Aire. Thank you very much for your response, Minister. Does the Minister agree that it is important that we take due regard of international authorities on these matters and, when we speak of consensus, it is entirely appropriate that we take regard of international opinion as well as the collective opinion of the House?

3.30 pm

Mr Weir: It will not greatly surprise Members, but one thing that there has not been a shortage of since I became Minister of Education is a range of people and organisations offering me their opinion, all of which will be given proper due regard. I accept that any international body will come up with conclusions. From that point of view, I think that due regard will be taken of them, but we also have to realise that we are in a system in which there is proper democratic accountability. We have to make judgements for ourselves. It is always important to take that level of advice, but, as it would be if I were to give advice to a range of countries on what their practices should be, it may not necessarily be the correct conclusion. Ultimately, we have to take our own decisions on that basis.

I agree with the report when it mentions that there is a need to ensure that there is educational opportunity for all. My concern is that if we move away, simply, from academic selection, we will entrench some of those differences and create much more of an

obvious situation. You need only look across the water to England, where there has been comprehensive education for a large number of years. It has led to a greater level of entrenchment, where those who have the greatest ability to pay can pay for public schools and can send their children to the Etons and Harrows, as we can see from the composition of the current Cabinet, for instance. I think that, rather than aiding social mobility and educational opportunity, it has tended to be regressive in its nature. I am careful that we do not go down that line. I appreciate that there will be many debates on the issue, particularly on academic selection, but I suspect that it may not be one on which there will be agreement across the House.

Mr Speaker: Members, time is up. I ask Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am seeking clarification on the ruling of members of the Opposition asking supplementary questions. At the start of Education questions, Mr O'Dowd and Mr Middleton had questions that were grouped. Each of them was able to ask a supplementary before Mrs Dobson was called for the Opposition. However, on the second question, Mr Lyttle and Mrs Long had questions grouped, but Mrs Barton asked a question before Mrs Long. Whatever the case may be about Mr Middleton — I understand he is certainly not a member of the Opposition, formal or informal — it is my understanding that all those who have tabled questions that are taken will be taken before the question of Opposition supplementaries comes up. I would appreciate your guidance on that.

Mr Speaker: On the first occasion, the error in the sequencing was mine at the Table. The second occasion was in line with the decision under the Good Friday Agreement, where, in the first three questions, the Opposition Member gets the preference. So, it was an error on my part at the Table, Mr Ford.

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

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the 2014-15 Excess Votes

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2016-17

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that resources, not exceeding £69,281,105.15 be authorised for use by the Department of Finance and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, for the year ending 31 March 2015, as summarised in part II of the 2014-15 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016. — [Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance).]

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,986,369,200, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017; and that resources, not exceeding £8,693,136,600, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 that was laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016. — [Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I call Pam Cameron. I beg your pardon; I call Mark Durkan.

Mr Durkan: As a member of the Opposition.

I take this opportunity to welcome the Minister and to wish him well in what is certain to be an

extremely challenging role. I listened to the Minister's speech earlier and was extremely heartened to hear him declare his opposition to austerity. I am hopeful that we will not have to remind him of that too often during his time in office.

The Minister spoke of the fix-all Fresh Start Agreement and pointed to the £500 million mitigation fund, secured to ensure that vulnerable people would not be left behind, in his words. Of course, though, that £500 million being spent in mitigation is coming from other budgets, and we must ensure that it does not create more vulnerable people or make life more difficult for vulnerable people by resulting in reduced services.

I would also like some reassurance that this fund, designed to protect against the worst impacts of welfare reform, will be sufficient to do so, particularly as the Fresh Start Agreement predated the passage of the Welfare Reform and Work Act through the House of Commons. That Act, passed after the Minister's party voted with the DUP to hand responsibly for welfare issues back to the Tories, is a further attack on the vulnerable people the Minister says he is determined must not be left behind. It will see the benefit cap, for example, reduced from £26,000 per household per year, which affects fewer than 500 families here in the North, to £20,000 per household per year, which, I imagine, will affect a few thousand more households. Perhaps the Minister can clarify how these new cuts have been factored into the spending of the mitigation fund.

As the SDLP health spokesperson, I will move on to how much more wisely, as opposed to just how much more, money should be spent on health. We, as an Assembly, need to ensure that less money actually needs to be spent on health in the first place. We need to ensure that our population is healthier, and one way of doing that is to ensure that our population is wealthier. An improved economy is something we all want, but we are going to need a bit more than the magic bullet that is a reduced rate of corporation tax. I am not the only Member with questions about the trajectory of that magic bullet and whether it is or is not still on target. The confidence of Ms Little Pengelly earlier that the reduction of the rate of corporation tax will proceed when stated and as stated contrasts somewhat with the Minister's mysterious musings on the subject in the media last week. There is also an inevitable impact on public services with the reduction of corporation tax, and I know Dr Farry touched on that when he spoke.

We need to see further and cleverer investment in skills and education to create a ready workforce, and we need to invest properly in infrastructure so that companies can access that new workforce. In that regard, I am very pleased to see the commitment to the A6 and A5, but I am a wee bit cautious that these much-needed and much-welcomed projects will face further delays down the road.

The Minister spoke about the possibilities afforded by borrowing. Certainly we should look at what opportunities exist to draw down cash to invest in projects that will boost our economy and create employment, but we cannot just go around the banks, borrowing money just because we can and racking up debt for our and future generations. Unless, of course, the Minister subscribes to the fiscal policy that his party espoused not that long ago — it was just last year, in advance of the Westminster election — that all debt should just be wiped.

Also, when entering any finance agreement, it is very important that we read the small print. Members will recall the £100 million loan sought from the Treasury by the DUP and Sinn Féin to ease a budgetary crisis. That basically allowed the Treasury to dictate to us how we manage our financial affairs.

We heard an extremely positive piece of news last week about the money coming from the European Investment Bank for housing. That is to be welcomed, but if we are to meet the huge need for social housing across all our constituencies, we have to maximise the borrowing power that we have at our disposal. That can be done only by allowing the Northern Ireland Housing Executive the same access to borrowing as housing associations, maximising the value of its housing stock.

On health, I will reiterate the point I made last week that the redistribution of services from acute settings to community care as outlined in Transforming Your Care and costed at £83 million is essential. That will see a reduction in bed-blocking, as it is termed, although I do not particularly like the term, and our much-maligned, and rightly maligned, waiting lists will reduce in length.

Surely we can find the money to invest to save, if we can manage to find £30 million or £40 million every monitoring round to throw at the problem of waiting lists without ever dealing with the issue.

The Health Committee learned just last week that the number of GP training places is being

increased to 85. That is very good, but, given the crisis facing general practice that we also heard about in the media last week, we do not believe that it goes far enough. We would like to see a further increase and, indeed, have costed proposals on that, which you will hear more about in the weeks and months to come. There needs to be further investment in early intervention in mental health, which will save our economy a lot of money in the long term and will save a lot of patients and families a lot of heartache and headaches.

Mr McKay: This is my first opportunity to wish the Minister of Finance well in his new role and on his particularly significant speech today on the Main Estimates. The Business Committee could have timed it better, because it looks like he will be responding at exactly the same time as Sweden play Ireland. In future, when the North or the South are playing, perhaps sittings could be suspended whilst those matches are taking place.

There is a clear need to ensure that the money we spend on health goes further. As the Health Minister has said, it is not primarily about buildings; it must be about services and improving health outcomes, reducing health inequalities and ensuring that all Departments put a greater focus on prevention. Health, as I have said many times before, is not an issue for one Department alone. We need to do things differently when it comes to health, and there are a lot of tough choices to be made. Why? Because, as a population, we are getting older. The number of over-65s is to rise by 44% — nearly 50% — in the next 15 years. We are getting more obese: it is projected that 40% of the population here will be obese in the next nine years, according to BMA figures. More of us are being diagnosed with diabetes, and there is a rise in the number of people with chronic conditions.

The current health system here will not be able to deal with the changing public health make-up and, therefore, it needs to change. The significant reduction in our Budget as a result of Westminster cuts will make this all the more challenging. That presents a challenge not only to the Executive and to government but to all the political parties, because the future of our health service and the prize of a world-class health service is more important than petty political point-scoring. I look forward to Professor Bengoa and the panel reporting to the Minister very shortly. There is also a need to reduce waste in health, especially with regard to cross-border services in the border areas. Clearly, there are opportunities there to free up money by having more joined-up

services. That money could go to other services that are in need. That, for me, is a no-brainer, and I look forward to the Minister looking at that and exploring solutions to it.

I will now move on to a couple of other issues. The Chair of the Education Committee mentioned the need for investment in the rural road network, and we look forward to the Executive delivering on the A5 and A6. Those are major projects that need to be delivered as soon as possible, but there is a concern in rural communities and in places that I represent, such as Dunloy and Loughgiel and up towards the glens of Antrim and Ballycastle, that the roads are in a bad state. That needs to be dealt with, and rural communities need to be assured that big projects such as the A5 and the A6 are not going to be delivered at their expense.

3.45 pm

The previous Agriculture Minister delivered the Rural Needs Act, and the incoming Executive need to be cognisant of the fact that the rural community has acute needs to be protected. I look forward to the Finance Minister's comments on how we protect the rural community and the budget for rural areas.

I would like to congratulate the Executive on delivery. In the north-east, the A26 is progressing well. This is key, not only for the many commuters to Belfast from places such as Ballymoney and Ballycastle but for tourists. We want to see more people coming to the north coast, not only to the port but to Ballycastle and elsewhere, including 'Game of Thrones' country in north Antrim.

Another issue that concerns the tourism community is air passenger duty (APD) and I am heartened to hear that the Finance Minister has made it one of his priorities. There is a lot of talk about the need to deliver on corporation tax, but APD is key to tourism and affects us here more than it does those across the water because of the North/South differential, highlighted in a PricewaterhouseCoopers report a couple of years ago and by the Finance and Personnel Committee. If we get APD right, we can deliver more tourists, more business and more jobs. You always hear anecdotally of the number of local people flying to and from other destinations and, of course, when it comes to the price of flights, Dublin wins hands down. We need to address that. We need a level playing field to ensure that we can compete with the rest of the island and get our fair share economically, which is not the case at present. There is an opportunity to bring in more tourists,

more business and more jobs, and I am sure that the Finance Minister will lead in that respect.

Finally, the Department will bring forward reliefs for sports clubs. That is a huge issue in rural areas. I know many GAA and rugby clubs that are affected by quite significant rates bills. In a lot of communities these clubs are the only show in town. They bring communities together and deliver not only on sport but on mental health and many other things.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr McKay: I would like an update from the Finance Minister on how he will look at that issue.

Mrs Cameron (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I am pleased to speak in support of the Supply resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2016-17, which grants the Department of Justice the resources to enable it to fund its responsibilities and priorities.

As the Justice Committee has not yet had an opportunity to scrutinise the Department's budget in detail, I will, of necessity, keep my remarks short. We have received some general information on the key budget allocations for 2016-17 and the pressures and challenges faced as the result of a reducing budget allocation. We have also had sight of the Department's June monitoring round return. The Committee is due to receive a more detailed briefing on the Department of Justice budget at our meeting this week, and I have no doubt that, following the meeting, Members will wish to schedule regular updates on the budget position, the various monitoring rounds and the development of the draft budget for 2017 onwards.

The Department has continued to prioritise front-line policing and other front-line areas as far as possible in this year's budget, with the aim of protecting outcomes for the public and funding to the voluntary and community sector and the policing and community safety partnerships. I am sure that the Committee will be supportive in its approach in common with previous Justice Committees. However, it is clear that the Department of Justice faces substantial challenges in this year's budget, and that pattern is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Clearly, identifying priorities is imperative in this type of budgetary climate.

The development of the Executive's Programme for Government provides the opportunity to do that and to ensure that the available budget is spent to best effect and achieves maximum impact. It also provides an imperative to identify proactively new ways of working to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the justice system. The previous Justice Committee produced a report titled 'Report on Justice in the 21st Century' at the end of the previous mandate that included a range of recommendations for innovative approaches, including the use of problem-solving court solutions to address offending behaviour and reduce reoffending and the use of online dispute-resolution mechanisms for low-value civil claims. In my view, the Department needs to move to implement those and other new approaches swiftly so that the same or better outcomes can be achieved for the public at less cost. It is also essential that the Department develop robust plans and programmes to enable it to access funding that is available from the Fresh Start Agreement to assist with, among other things, legacy-related pressures and tackling paramilitarism.

The main pressures emerging at this early stage of the Budget cycle for the Department of Justice relate to the NI Prison Service staff and pay pressures; the NI Courts and Tribunals Service fine-default hearing costs and the shortfall in income; and the perennial problem of the cost of legal aid. Despite the Executive allocating £15 million in the 2016-17 Budget to the Department in recognition of the ongoing pressures that it faces with legal aid, additional pressure is already emerging. Given the plans that are in place to address the backlog of Crown Court cases that have arisen as a result of the action taken last year by solicitors and barristers, there is potential for that pressure to increase during the 2016-17 Budget period. The Committee will undertake work on legal aid policy and legislation over the coming months and will wish to monitor and take account of the budget impact and pressure in that area as well.

There is also the potential for significant pressure depending on the outcome of test cases on fine-default imprisonment, which the Department of Justice does not have the capacity to fund. It will need to be monitored closely.

I turn briefly to the capital budget. Again, the Department has had to prioritise its spend in the area. The overview briefing by the NI Prison Service to the Committee on 9 June highlighted a range of capital initiatives that needs to be

progressed to assist its reform programme. The PSNI also has a range of capital requirements. Further decisions will have to be made in the area. I am sure that the Committee will wish to assess the capital priorities as part of the ongoing budgetary process.

Briefly, on the Department of Justice's 2015-16 provisional out-turn figures, its non-ring-fenced resource DEL underspend of £10.6 million represents 1% of the budget. Of that, the PSNI underspend accounted for £3 million, which represents 0.4% of its total budget. The capital underspend of £1.2 million represents 2.7% of the budget. Those figures are encouraging and illustrate that the Department has worked hard over the past financial year to identify proactively and manage emerging underspends, in order to ensure that the budget is utilised as fully as possible to support the delivery of its priorities and objectives.

I conclude by adding some very brief remarks as a Member from the Democratic Unionist Party. The Department has shouldered some extreme budgetary cuts. We must ensure that we look for innovative ways in which to safeguard it from any further constraints, which, if they were to transpire, I fear would have an inevitable negative impact on front-line services. I am aware of the difficulties surrounding legal aid, which have gone on for some time and for which there is no easy fix, but we must look as a matter of urgency to resolve those issues to ensure that the already diminished budget is not put under any further pressures. I look forward to ensuring that we access the £32 million Fresh Start security funding for the PSNI and overseeing that it is allocated in a prudent, inventive and sensible manner to maximise its potential. I support the Supply resolution and Main Estimates 2016-17.

Mr Poots: I will make just a couple of comments on some of the issues that were raised by Members who have already spoken before getting into the issues that I most want to talk about. Claire Hanna's assertion about hand-picked SIF organisations is just an assertion and is nonsense. It is one that she should desist from making, because it is wholly inaccurate. I put that on record.

I invite her to come and see some of the really good work that is going on and which is making a fundamental difference to the lives of children and will ensure that we have better education outcomes and reduce health inequalities as a result, as opposed to such negativity.

Mrs Cameron has just spoken about legal aid. I trust that it is something that Ms Sugden, our

new Justice Minister, can get to grips with. In the last mandate, the Minister did not get to grips with legal aid, and we are still expending far too much on it. That really needs to be got to grips with.

As well as that, the Prison Service has been left in a dreadful situation; Prison Service staff morale has never been so low. That is a significant challenge for the Minister. Funding is a critical issue in the Prison Service, and it is an area that I think she needs to address. Taking money from the legal aid budget to ensure that prisons are safe environments where people come out with the opportunity of reform is something that we should all aspire to and have fewer people in the justice system as a consequence.

I want to make some remarks in respect of DAERA. It is a very interesting Supply resolution period, given that many Departments have come together, and it will be interesting to see whether the funding has truly followed the responsibilities. Miss McIlveen has many challenges ahead of her in DAERA, not least because of the inability of the previous Ministers to deal with TB. Tuberculosis is something that most of the general public do not hear much about, but we spend £30 million every year on it, and we are not reducing the problem. Interestingly enough, I sat in a North/South meeting where the last Minister, Michelle the second, wanted to have a greater all-Ireland strategy, and Simon Coveney challenged her on where we were on TB. We could not move forward on what Sinn Féin wanted — an all-Ireland health strategy — because of the TB situation, and the Government in the Republic of Ireland would not accept that.

The reason why Mrs O'Neill would not move forward with the Irish Government on TB was because of the protection of badgers. The Irish Government had a completely different attitude to that which existed in Northern Ireland. It is important that we have a healthy bovine population and a healthy wildlife population. Ignoring the problem or dealing with one section of the problem — removing the bovine population that has TB while not removing the badger population that has TB at the same time — will ensure that we continue to expend public money on not dealing with the problem. That money could be better spent elsewhere, such as on health, education and justice or on improving our farm businesses.

There are other significant areas of challenge. We have had a lot of focus on moving offices from greater Belfast to other areas. There has

also been a notion of creating a new computerised system to replace APHIS. At one stage, the Department was looking to spend somewhere in the region of £40 million. I challenged it consistently throughout that period that it does not need to spend that amount of money on a computerised system to monitor the movement of animals and that it could do something considerably less. We managed to produce an electronic care record, which contains the records of 1.8 million people. It is transferable between the primary sector and the hospital sector.

That was produced for £9 million — very thick files. We will need to see an effort by the Department to move away from the grand spending scheme that was previously proposed and find a means of developing a more cost-effective system there.

NIEA as an organisation is detested in the rural community. It treats farmers as criminals until proven otherwise. We need to have a serious look at the role of the NIEA and how it conducts its business to ensure that those in the agriculture community, who have been the custodians of our countryside for many generations, are able to do their jobs in a way —

4.00 pm

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. This touches on his comments regarding the image or perception of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency in the rural community. Does the Member agree with me that an independent or arm's-length environmental protection agency might be the way to go?

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

Mr Poots: Thank you.

No, absolutely not. If you give the same people that unfettered power, they will potentially be even worse in how they conduct themselves.

Last year, one farmer in County Down shot himself after an NIEA visit, such was the pressure that he was put under. That is the significance of what those people do. I was speaking to another farmer recently who has TB as a result of the inability to deal with the badger population in his area. In fact, it had been found that all the badgers that had become roadkill had type 2 tuberculosis, which is the one that is transmissible to cows. As a consequence of that, he has had six herd tests.

When his animals went up over a certain level, NIEA came in and did a farm inspection and said, "You've too many animals on your farm for the slurry tanks. Therefore, we're actually fining you and are taking money off your single farm payment", in spite of the fact that, legally, he could not sell or move animals off the farm. Those sorts things need to be dealt with.

The wreckage of DOE has left huge challenges in that respect that have to be dealt with —

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

Mr Poots: — and I wish the Minister well in doing that.

Ms Boyle: First, I welcome the Minister to the House and wish him well in his new role.

I wish to speak as a member of the Justice Committee on the Justice budget in the Main Estimates Supply resolution. The vast majority of Justice budget funding goes to policing, and that is accepted. However, the Department of Justice had a range of priorities in its previous budget, and I want to focus on the amount spent on domestic abuse through the PCSPs, the Public Health Agency, the PSNI and statutory agencies.

The newly appointed Justice Minister, Claire Sugden, has already given an assurance and a commitment that she will make domestic abuse a priority for herself and her Department, and I welcome that, as do others on the Committee. A recent PSNI report on statistics for domestic abuse motivation makes stark reading, with 28,287 domestic abuse incidents recorded in 2014-15. That is the highest level recorded since 2004-05 and is 35% higher than it was at that time. Indeed, 13,426 domestic abuse crimes were recorded in 2014-15, and that is also the highest number recorded since 2004-05. Given that and moving forward into the Budget, we have to reflect on those high levels and make changes, albeit that that will be challenging given the cuts to our block grant by the Tories.

The level of violence against a person with a domestic motivation continues to increase year on year, and it can involve a range of offences from minor assault that can cause physical harm to murder. There has also been an increase in breaches of non-molestation orders, with 972 recorded in 2014-15. While there has been a lot of good work in the Department of Justice and other agencies on domestic abuse, there is always room for improvement. With

proper priority-based resourcing and a review of all services, not just those the Department of Justice delivers but those delivered by the PSNI, with a particular focus on domestic abuse, then and only then will we see a slight change and a decrease in the figures that have been recorded.

The overall budget for tackling domestic abuse is not enough. I could not find the overall figure either from PSNI or the Department of Justice, but, if the Minister is to make domestic violence a priority in her Department, it needs to be adequately funded. She needs to be supported in the call for funding to tackle domestic abuse and domestic crime so that the statutory agencies, along with Women's Aid, the courts, the PSNI and the PPS, can have the confidence and ability to protect vulnerable women, men and their families from those who commit these crimes against the person.

Any reduction to the budget in this area can and will have a catastrophic consequence. It will be felt mostly in rural areas, where they find it difficult to get access to the right and proper people who can provide that support to women and men. I am well aware of cases where the PSNI, for different reasons, has failed to fully carry out its duties when dealing with domestic abuse. That includes not recording or taking statements, not following proper procedures and not putting in place arrangements for a victim to get medical assistance and to access the right assistance at the time. There are areas within that that need to be looked at, and we need to ensure that the budget goes in the right direction.

We also need to look at the training of all our PSNI officers. I am aware that in all the districts of policing there is a domestic violence team, but it is essential and important to note that all officers have the ability to deal with domestic abuse. It should be one of the PSNI's strategic priorities for the coming year. I am aware of a corporate plan that the PSNI has for keeping people safe, but in that plan domestic abuse must remain at the top and high on the agenda of priorities. If it is not, we will be failing the public for generations to come. The PPS should also review how it treats cases of domestic abuse. I am aware of instances when the PSNI has forwarded cases to the PPS and the PPS has responded with "No case to answer". That can be horrendous for the victim and their family.

As I stated, the public need to have the confidence to report domestic abuse and crime, and there needs to be innovative ways of dealing with that. Although we have increasing

numbers of recorded domestic abuse incidents year on year, the under-reporting of domestic abuse and domestic crime against the person still remains very high. Only when we have an effective and responsive justice system from the PPS and the PSNI through to the courts can we collectively address this scourge on our society.

Moving forward with this topic, we need to learn lessons from the 2014-15 Budget on how funding for front-line services like Women's Aid is prioritised so that groups and organisations can continue to deliver the good work they do in this area. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response on that when he makes his final comments.

Ms Bradshaw: I have two points to make before I get into the body of my speech. First of all, I pass on my good wishes to Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, my South Belfast colleague, in his role as Finance Minister. I would also like to address a comment made by Edwin Poots and the irony of his criticism of the Alliance Justice Minister for his approach to addressing the reform of legal aid and the Prison Service head on, despite the fact that successive DUP Health Ministers, during the last mandate, failed to make any inroads into the need for reform in the health and social care sector. It is rather ironic that he chose to do that.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bradshaw: Yes.

Dr Farry: Does the Member also recognise that the issue was brought by the Justice Minister repeatedly to the Executive, but it was blocked by the two parties that controlled the Executive agenda.

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

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you.

Earlier today and this afternoon, we have heard many issues arising from the Budget. I emphasise that I oppose the motion, but I wish to put forward a constructive viewpoint of opposition to it. It bears repeating that we are very concerned by the failure to consider the long term adequately, the failure to tackle vested interests, particularly segregated institutions, which means money is wasted on buildings that are not necessary, and the failure to invest adequately in skills and training where it is required, rendering it —

Mr Stalford: I thank the Member for giving way. She referred to the need to stop investing so much in buildings: is that a reference to Stranmillis University College? Is it still the view of the Alliance Party that it should close?

Ms Bradshaw: We do not believe in buildings; we believe in services. We encouraged those institutions to work together to come up with a workable solution that would have saved money from the public purse.

As I said, the failure to invest adequately in skills and training where it is required renders pointless any attempt at promoting inward investment by taking a further chunk out of our public service budget to reduce corporation tax in certain cases.

The Programme for Government actually offers hope for the future. It is mystifying why some parties who were involved in the work that went into it have now turned their back on it completely. Therefore, I intend to take my time here to be constructive and ask questions about whether we are really aligning some of the better aspects of that framework with our Budget priorities, particularly around health.

The Programme for Government framework has 14 outcomes. A first step will be to consider how much of the overall devolved Budget is allocated to each outcome, perhaps also considering if there is any other money, for example through welfare expenditure or, dare I say, EU funding, that can usefully complement it. Doing that will not be an exact science, but it will usefully help allocate responsibility for each outcome and lines of accountability for delivery. That may be usefully extended to indicators. How much of the Budget is being allocated to reducing health inequality, for example? How much of that is being allocated in the most efficient manner? For those responsible for the programmes under each indicator, are they able to take a broad view, beyond their individual silo, to allocate the funds in the most efficient manner and with accountability?

We have already this term had a debate in the Assembly on illegal drugs, which particularly affect health in the areas where life expectancy is broadly lowest. Yet, this is not a Department of Health issue and nor is housing, welfare provision or education. All of those have an impact on health. The same applies to increasing healthy life expectancy, improving mental health and reducing preventable deaths, as they are all issues that go well beyond any Department.

The outcome-based approach that Scotland has been developing for nearly a decade is genuinely innovative. The fundamental question is whether this Budget is genuinely innovative too. Scots involved with developing the approach will tell you that it requires tackling vested interests — notably institutions — managing expectations and more local allocation of funding, often well beyond central government.

On the first of those, my colleagues have given an obvious example: it is clear that we do not need to train so many teachers in segregated colleges. Continuing to do so is the precise opposite of the outcome-based approach the Executive parties are now embarked on and supposedly supporting. The same applies, frankly, to education and health. An outcomes-based approach would see the notion of community-based schooling — allocating budgets not to the interests of individual schools but for the overall local communities they serve — taken seriously. We have supposedly been doing this for some time, but there is scant evidence of any actual outcome.

In health, of course, we have been told by reviews, reports and panels that we need to re-image the health service, yet absolutely no work has been done to explain that to local communities, who fear that reform, which would, in fact, be good for their health, is actually a loss of some sort.

4.15 pm

The second of those — the management of expectations — again requires more realistic engagement with the public and local communities about how far the taxes and rates they pay will go. An outcomes-based approach requires more honesty from civic leaders, including politicians, that not every demand can or even should be met and that often the issue is not how much money is spent but how it is spent. I therefore ask how the Executive parties propose to openly and honestly engage with the public on the need to reform services, including merging institutions and relocating services for the greater long-term good.

There is also the issue of more local allocation of funding, which the Executive parties have not been comfortable with until this point. The failure, for example, to devolve urban regeneration to councils is a step away from an outcomes-based approach, not towards one.

For some of the reasons outlined, the whole purpose of the new approach is for

communities to have a greater say in their health provision, their welfare provision, their education and everything else. The problem with the Budget is that it does nothing to demonstrate how the new approach outlined in the framework has been taken into account.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bradshaw: Quickly, yes.

Mr Storey: Is it not also the case that some councils are happy for regeneration powers not to be devolved at this time until they become accustomed and used to the powers that they already have? When the powers come, the councils will be in a better place to use them to the ultimate benefit of their constituents.

Ms Bradshaw: I appreciate that that was the case, but we are now two years into the council term. Many of them should be up to speed by now.

How far, for example, will we travel in the right direction on a good jobs index if we are not adequately investing in skills? How do we increase the proportion of graduates moving into employment within six months if we continue deliberately to train hundreds of young people for careers that we know do not exist? Many more such questions arise from the Budget and Programme for Government process.

In conclusion, I summarise by saying that the Programme for Government framework requires a re-imaging of how we do public services, but I see little re-imaging of how we do the Budget. In principle, I have no objection to borrowing more money or raising more revenue in a fair way —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Will the Member bring her remarks to a close, please?

Ms Bradshaw: — but I absolutely oppose doing that while leaving segregation in place and deliberately mismatching skills.

Mr Aiken: First, I welcome the Minister to his role. I will speak in my role as the Deputy Chair of the Economy Committee and as the opposition spokesman on the economy. I also extend my good views on his endeavours to achieve some form of control and direction over the Northern Ireland Government's financing, budgeting and forecasting process. May I also say that, having personally worked with you before, we, as an Opposition, look forward to seeing how much you can bring your business

perspective to the Department and, hopefully, achieve a much more focused and fit-for-purpose Department and see if you can achieve some much-needed reform? While we may disagree on the degree of austerity that is coming from Whitehall, my party would point to the impenetrable state of our financial processes. As we have seen from the plethora of SpAds, inefficiency and quangos and a governing organisation that seems to be significantly overstaffed at some levels for its purpose, we believe that substantial savings can be achieved and passed on, not just to the Department for the Economy but to other Departments.

Our Committee and I have yet to see or be briefed on the detail of the in-year budget, spend, resource or cash and have not yet, regrettably, had the opportunity to discuss with the Economy Minister his plans and programmes for the future. I therefore apologise for making these limited observations based on the Statement of Excesses and the Estimates. While I am aware that some of these issues may have been raised before, we have some questions in relation to the presentation of the figures for the overall Budget and, indeed, for the Department for the Economy. Having looked at the Excess Vote, I have to ask how we manage to get the excess of resource expenditure to be close to £16 million or 15.8% out in our 2014-15 spring Supplementary Estimates. While that has been described as a technical accounting issue, I am sure that, in his previous roles, the Finance Minister would have found such a negative variation unacceptable, and we should not find it acceptable either.

As an Opposition, we would like to be assured that budgeting and accurate forecasting are now at the core of his Department. Again, I call on the Minister to institute a rigorous annual benchmarking of the delivery of our Government against those of the other regions and the Republic of Ireland so that we, the people of Northern Ireland, can assess whether we have a Government and Civil Service that are actually fit for purpose.

In the rather thin Department for the Economy part of the Estimates, I note issues that the Minister and his Department may wish to comment on. One of the most significant is that the Department for the Economy is also the managing authority for the Northern Ireland European social fund (ESF), which has a total value from 2014 to 2020 of £360 million. What contingency has his Department made to fill the shortfall in the event of a Brexit, and has other work been conducted across all Departments to

see how much funding is being expected from EU funding lines and on the impact that a Brexit would have on those programmes? I suggest that we look at those issues fairly urgently.

I would also like to look at the Main Estimates for 2016-17 in his Department's resource-to-cash reconciliation, particularly when it looks at depreciation, impairments and revaluations. The 2014 out-turn had a negative variation of about £121 million and a provision of minus £131 million in 2016-17. In the 2015-16 presentations, it was a positive variation of £92 million. In the absence of any form of detailed explanation, can the Minister ask the officials to provide some detail? That looks like a variation from baseline of some £232 million. How could that possibly be? Unsurprisingly, however, the 2015 net cash requirement appears, miraculously, to be broadly in line with the other years. I do not understand that, and, Minister, using your experience in the business community, I think that you would probably like to have a close look at that one as well, because I do not understand it.

We also have concerns, among others, over support to the universities sector; the promotion of Northern Ireland plc by Invest Northern Ireland and Tourism Northern Ireland; and the role of North/South bodies and their efficacy and value for money. I am sure that the Finance Minister will bring a greater rigour to future budgeting and forecasting, and, as an Opposition, we will be providing suitable scrutiny and vigour. For that, however, we need appropriate and timely detail, for not just us but, importantly, all the Northern Ireland community, and we need to do that as a matter of urgency.

Mr Attwood: I, too, congratulate the Minister on his appointment and wish him well during his tenure.

I want to ask him a number of questions. I ask the Minister to look, sometime or other, at section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Act 2016, which refers to draft Budgets and the obligation that falls on him to table, in a financial year, a motion on the UK funding allocated for that year. That might be in the future, but my question is in the short term.

Section 9(2) refers to the fact that you would be required, if the Secretary of State so directs, to lay a statement if the amount of the block grant had been revised in-year. Therefore, my question to the Minister, and this was picked up earlier by the Alliance Party, is this: are you picking up anything that suggests to you that

you might have to come before the House, under the legislation passed by the Westminster Parliament earlier this year, with a statement about a revised Budget block grant from London? I ask that not least because of the comments made by Mr Nesbitt on what Ulster Bank says today — not in May but today — about the economic circumstances for the next quarter; namely:

"a marked deterioration in business conditions within the construction sector"

and that:

"a significant slowdown has been in evidence."

One of the reasons for that is what? The slowdown in the construction business in Britain.

I come to my second question for the Minister. A motion on childcare was passed last week, endorsed by the Minister's own party and not opposed by any other party. The Minister of Education indicated that, although he may have some issues about when and how to roll out childcare, he did not appear to oppose the principle of the roll-out of childcare to 20 hours, and 30 hours thereafter, for three- and four-year-olds.

If the Minister of Education were to come to the Minister of Finance with a specific proposal in that regard in this year or in coming years, what would his attitude be? I ask that not least because, as the Minister rightly indicated, the roll-out increasing it to 20 hours a week even in this financial year would cost £15 million. That happens to be in and around the suggested figure that you will allocate in a June monitoring round to deal with the in-year pressures on our schools budget. Until the Chair of the Education Committee indicated this, I was not aware that £15 million will be released under June monitoring to deal with the in-year pressures on our school budgets and £5 million for special needs. Can you indicate whether, if that is the case, that is a quick fix for the problem this year or whether it will be an enduring approach over the lifetime of this mandate so that our school principals have certainty in respect of their budgets, not just for this year but for coming years?

My fourth question to the Minister is on the A5. As he will know, his predecessor tabled a ministerial statement on 17 December outlining spend on the A5 in each of the financial years up to 2021, the spend for 2016-17 being £13.2

million. The Minister may or may not be aware that the deputy First Minister said that, in respect of that spend, construction work would be commenced by the autumn of this year. Yet, as the Minister is likely to know, or will know soon enough, a public inquiry will not even be commenced or concluded by the autumn of this year. A recommendation will go to the Minister for Infrastructure some time in the spring or summer of next year, and the earliest possible date of any spend on construction works on the A5 will be the autumn of 2017. That matter was confirmed to us in our conversations with senior civil servants during the abortive PFG negotiations. Can the Minister confirm that the Budget allocation of £13.2 million this year for the A5 is substantially not going to be spent because there is not going to be substantial works completed in respect of the A5 during this year?

My fifth question to the Minister concerns the fact that he raged against austerity, and he was right to do so. I have spent many a long hour, maybe too many hours, in the Chamber — Mr Storey is laughing — raging against austerity and also making proposals to deal with austerity on the pensions, Budget and welfare sides. Mr O'Dowd also raged against austerity in his speech, and he was right to do so. Will the Finance Minister now confirm that, when powers on welfare were surrendered last autumn, just before Christmas, to London, the consequence of that was that there will be a freeze on benefits for the next four years and that the Chancellor of the Exchequer can unilaterally change the rules on the benefit cap and reduce it without reference to you or to anybody in this Chamber and can make other malign welfare changes? Will the Minister confirm that, in all the rage against welfare reform and against austerity, you signed up to austerity with the legislative consent motion that was passed in the Chamber last year? So much for raging against austerity.

I have two final points. I go back to the point raised by Mr Nesbitt. Is it not time for even a notional budget line to be created to give victims of institutional abuse some sense that now, on the far side of Hart, there will be a redress scheme? If you meet the victims of institutional abuse, they tell you that they are dying as we speak. They deserve some certainty. Give it to them by even a notional budget line for a redress scheme rather than let it hang and hang and hang until the far side of Hart and beyond for many a long year —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr Attwood: They have, Minister, been waiting far too long.

Mr Storey: I rise to make a few comments in relation to the onerous task that lies to the Finance Minister over the next couple of days. Having been in that post, I know all too well the challenges that he will face. I have to say, however, that I am disappointed that the previous Member who spoke did not go as far as he did when I was the Minister and accuse the current Minister of being employed by DWP.

Mr Attwood: That is tomorrow.

Mr Storey: That will be tomorrow — or by the Treasury, because he obviously wants to take away the current Minister's capacity for independent thinking.

4.30 pm

When you speak in the House on finance, it has to be set in a particular context. Sometimes, the comments that come from the leaders of the opposition parties really amaze me. I say the leaders of the opposition parties, not the leader of the Opposition, because we have a plethora of opposition parties, and, at the last count, I do not know how many leaders there were of the opposition. They all have their views on what should be done, but the one thing that they all seem to forget is that we are dependent on the fact that we are part of the United Kingdom; that we are part of the sovereign Parliament at Westminster, which gives a block grant to Northern Ireland; and that, for the last number of years, there has been a considerable strain on that particular Budget.

As Members and citizens of the United Kingdom, I think it would do us well to always couch what we say in reality, and not live in this constant world that is easy for people to live in, where a money tree grows at the bottom of the Stormont estate — a place where all they have to do is come to the House, make a few complaints, get a few petitions, have a few nice words, have the press statement out before you come to the House and, suddenly, the money will appear. Well that is not how it works in reality in the real world. I am surprised by people like the Deputy Chair of the Economy Committee, who, as he tells us regularly, having been in the business world would recognise some fiscal realities for how we have to operate in the political world.

I will move on to some of the issues that, I think, are of relevance for our constituents.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he recognise that the two parties that went into the last election making the single biggest promise on spending were his party and Sinn Féin with respect to an extra £1 billion for Health? All of the other parties' spending commitments were dwarfed by that.

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

Mr Storey: Yes, and I also say that the electorate endorsed what my party did, and that is why we had the election result we did. I am not one of those people who believes that, as a senior member of the Ulster Unionist Party in north Antrim famously said, an election manifesto is only good for the day of the election and after that the world moves on. I still have a copy of our election manifesto, and the commitments that we made in it are not just words that are written to fill pages; they are things that we actually believe should happen to ensure that Northern Ireland keeps moving forward. That includes the creation of more jobs. In my constituency of North Antrim, I know all too well what it is like to deal with the consequences of the closure of JTI; the closure of Michelin; the devastating impact that Pattons had in relation to the difficulties that were created; and many other jobs that have been lost.

If it is now down to the two parties in the Executive, and it is, I say to the Minister to work with his colleagues in other Departments and that our focus needs to be the creation of jobs. I do not just want jobs created in North Antrim for my own constituents — I want them wherever the need exists. We have seen a slight increase in the unemployment figures recently. We have the news today coming in relation to the Ulster Bank. Those are issues of concern. They are issues that we ought to be worried about, but let no one be foolish enough to think that somehow coming into the House and making throwaway comments — making good headlines if you can get on 'Newsline' at 6:00 pm — will somehow, automatically, fix the issue.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He refers to the context of these things, and, of course, the context is that we now have a Tory-majority Government, which only one party in the Chamber campaigned to put in office. If fingers are to be pointed anywhere for the constraints in the Budget in Northern Ireland, who campaigned for them in 2010, and who put them in?

Mr Storey: I also happen to be one of those individuals who keeps —

A Member: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Storey: Does the Member want me to give way?

I happen to be one of those people who keeps a lot of election memorabilia, and I have the UCUNF document. That was that failed political process with the Tories. If we want to see where the problem lies, I think one of the leaders of the Opposition need not look any further.

Let us come to some issues that have been of benefit to our business community. I refer to employment and the need to create new jobs in Northern Ireland. That has to be for us a priority, whether it is in Loughguile or Loughgall, or whether it happens to be in Ballymoney or Banbridge. Wherever it is across Northern Ireland, the focus has to be on creating good, sustainable jobs for our constituents. It is also about those small and medium-sized businesses that are the backbone of our industry and our economy. In the previous Executive, let us not forget that we helped over 35,000 properties through small business rates relief; let us not forget that a total of 530 properties benefited from the empty property relief scheme; and let us not forget that it was this party, the DUP, that gave the commitment to, and delivered on, industrial derating, which benefited a total of 4,443 properties. That, I think, was a commitment not only to what we want to see in new investment but to what we have.

I know how important small and medium-sized enterprises are in my constituency. I ask the Finance Minister to continue to do the work that needs to be done to underpin those small and medium-sized enterprises and the large manufacturing companies. I am delighted we now have a number of those large companies in north Antrim, such as Terex, which is a world leader in the manufacturing industry. I want to see those companies progress and prosper in a way that benefits not only them as companies but the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I am pleased to speak as the Chair of the Committee for the Economy. I say that with the caveat that most Committee Chairs have felt or expressed today, namely that the Committees have only recently begun to meet and are involved in high-level briefings with departmental officials. So, in

detailed matters such as those in front of us, the Committees have yet to take a view. However, the Committee sees its roll in scrutinising the Department's budget as a key function. We look forward to closely engaging with the Minister on that.

The Economy Department's activities underpin a great deal of what is in the draft Programme for Government. The Department is pivotal to the development of greater prosperity across the North and ensuring, as people have been referring to, that there is the benefit of well-paid jobs for people right across the North, including an improvement in skills and innovation.

Members are aware, of course, that the debate allows detailed scrutiny of spending plans for Departments and seeks the authorisation of Members for that funding to be provided. The Committee notes that the provision sought by the Department for 2016-17 is 18.5% higher than the final net provision for 2015-16. However, as we have not yet seen the detailed outworkings of the reasons for and the impact of that increase, it is difficult to comment on it. The Committee is also aware that a significant proportion of the Department's budget is controlled through arm's-length bodies and other core-funded partner organisations. In addition, the Department has considerable annually managed expenditure in the form of demand-led programmes.

The Committee is, I am sure, in agreement that the Department for the Economy should be properly resourced, but we also recognise that there is a difference between adequate resourcing and money well spent. In the debates last week on the draft Programme for Government, the manufacturing strategy and the economy strategy, we highlighted that the Committee would be undertaking a detailed analysis of the models of resourcing that the Department and its key arm's-length bodies use. Members want to ensure that the Department is responsive to the needs of the North and our need to work as part of a global economy.

We have asked the Department for more information on a range of issues, including budget and finances, and we look forward to engaging with the Minister on all that. We also look forward to engaging with the stakeholder groups, industry, businesses, unions and others that have a very strong industry. Of course, the further and higher education sectors are now part of the Committee's remit on the outworking of the Department's work in the time ahead and the budget that will, hopefully, match that.

I have a couple of points on my own behalf. I have been listening to the debate, waiting for some pearls of wisdom to come from those who criticise and, in the case of the Alliance Party at least, intend to vote against the motion. Stephen Farry, in fairness to him, did put forward some suggestions — none of which I agree with, but at least he put forward some suggestions. I have not heard much from others. I heard the Deputy Chair of the Finance Committee saying that the Minister must learn to slice the money more effectively. I certainly hope that he has much greater ambition than simply fine-slicing the pie that we already have. He is on record as looking for ways to raise further money and increase the spending power of the Executive.

Ms Hanna: Will the Member give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Ms Hanna: Did you just walk in halfway through the sentence? The Member will recall that, prior to the part where I talked about more effectively slicing the pie, I talked about growing the pie and seeking some information on the revenue raising that would be part of that.

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member that I was here for the entirety of her speech. That was the remark that stood out for me. As I said, I hope that —

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

Mr Murphy: — the Minister displays more ambition than simply the slicing of the pie in a better way.

A number of Members raised the issue of corporation tax. That strikes me as amusing. It was also raised at Question Time with the deputy First Minister. The position around corporation tax is in the Fresh Start Agreement; it outlines the target figure, the target date and the negotiation that has to take place in and around affordability. Interestingly, during the negotiations, the British Government wanted to remove the affordability part of that discussion, because they wanted a done deal there and then and no further negotiations to try to get the best deal possible for the Executive and, consequently, the people of the North. It seems now that people want to return to that position; they argue that we should just settle now and that the Minister should not involve himself in a negotiation to try to get the best deal possible but just have the matter settled and accept what is on the table at the moment. That would be

an absolutely unwise strategy. I wonder why people who purport to represent constituents out in the community, who want better spending and who criticise the spending of the Executive want to shut down an important negotiation that the Minister of Finance and the Executive will have with the Treasury ahead of the process.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I appreciate what he is setting out and that there is an issue, in his mind, about affordability. Certainly, from our perspective, there is an issue around skills. However, the potential problem is that your colleagues in the DUP are saying that this is happening — no ifs or buts. Invest Northern Ireland is out selling Northern Ireland as an investment location today on the basis that this will be in place for certain in April 2018. There is a mixed message coming from the two parties in the Government.

Mr Murphy: It is not the case in my mind; it is the case in the Fresh Start Agreement. A caveat in the delivery of that is affordability. If we were to simply say, "Let's scrap the bit about affordability and just go ahead with the target date and the target rate", we would be going against what is in the Fresh Start Agreement. There is no contradiction between what is in the Fresh Start Agreement and the certainty that people want to provide. We are certain that we can make it affordable and make the date and time frame. However, there is a negotiation to be had with Treasury. It leaves me somewhat bemused when I continuously hear people raising the question again, as if to close down that negotiation, settle for what is on offer now and just say, "This is happening; what's on the table at the moment is good enough". What is on the table is not good enough. The Treasury wanted to close the negotiation down. I do not understand why other people in the Chamber want to assist it in doing that. It certainly was not doing that in the interests of the people whom we represent in the Chamber.

This is an important issue for us. I wish the Finance Minister well in the negotiation that he will be involved in. Regardless of whether the parties here consider themselves to be in the Opposition or in the Executive, or whatever their particular position happens to be, we have a collective responsibility to ensure that we get the best possible deal so that we have the maximum amount of finance available to us to deliver a step change in growing the economy and the other key planks of the Programme for Government: well-being, public services and protecting the most vulnerable in society. We need to arm ourselves with as much as we

possibly can to try to deliver on those objectives.

I wish the Finance Minister well. The position in relation to corporation tax is in the Fresh Start Agreement. It was negotiated by all the parties. That is where it sits, and that is what needs to be delivered. I do not doubt that we have the right person in the job to try to do that.

4.45 pm

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak today from a health perspective. First, however, I register my bitter disappointment at the information — or, rather, the total lack of information — that we received from Health officials at last Thursday's Health Committee. Presenting before us for the first time in the new mandate, officials were scheduled to brief us on the June monitoring round. However, despite the Minister referencing this bid in her statement to the House last Monday, they told us that they were unable to discuss or answer any questions on the June monitoring round, which was the very reason why they were attending the Committee in the first place. While other Committees have had Ministers and permanent secretaries before them, the Health Committee has had departmental officials who were unable to take questions from us on the very reason why they attended. At a time when the crisis within all levels of the health service is felt dearly by staff and patients alike, this does not bode well for the future; neither does the apparent lack of commitment from the new Minister and her Department to see an end to short-term funding of the health service. That is an aim that the Executive should work towards. When you speak to the trusts, GPs and health managers at all levels, you find that the one thing that they crave, but do not have, is stable finances. I was initially heartened that the Minister included that very phrase in her address to the House last Monday. She talked about attaining:

"the prize of stable finances and sustainable services" — [Official Report (Hansard), 6 June 2016, p2, col 2]

while continuing to seek short-term funding from the Executive. However, it now appears that "stable finances" are to receive only lip service. Officials told me on Thursday that they are working on just a three-year budget for capital and four years for resource. That does not show the forward planning that is needed in our health service, and, indeed, surely when we receive the findings of Professor Bengoa and the subsequent response from the Executive,

the long-term budget will become clear. Would it not be more sensible for that budget to look to the future, across the next 10 years or so, as is happening in other regions of the United Kingdom and in the Republic of Ireland? On the one hand, we have the promise of stable finances and sustainable services that can only come with reform; on the other, the wheels of government grind slowly.

It looks as though our health service vision is already being set for just the next three to four years, before we even see the findings of Professor Bengoa. We should be looking seriously at proper, costed, future planning to achieve the best healthcare system for all our people. I know that the Finance Minister has a business background, so he will know the importance of future planning. I encourage him, in speaking to his Executive colleagues, especially to his colleague the Minister of Health, to seek to forward plan, not to budget for the short term but seriously plan for the long term. Failure to do so could result in yet further headline-grabbing, multi-million-pound figures that, whilst giving short-term confidence to patients, do little to fix the problems experienced by one in five of our population and by the very dedicated healthcare professionals at all levels who seek to care for those of us who are ill.

Health is arguably the most important Department in the Executive, though, apparently not when it comes to choosing it during a d'Hondt process. It consumes half the Executive's Budget, which should be reason enough to ensure that its future is planned and is, therefore, stable, rather than being held together and managed for the short term. There are undoubtedly many challenges that our health service faces: an ageing population; the increase in the incidence of diabetes; the delivery of autism services; the promotion of public health and healthy eating; and, from my perspective, the continued promotion of the life-saving power of organ donation.

Last year, as a result of the chaos in our health spending over recent times, the Minister of Finance and the Executive were given unprecedented controls over the Department of Health's expenditure. I ask the Minister for an update on those powers, and whether he is confident that the contents of the Estimates before us mean that this summer will not see a repeat of the bizarre scenes from two years ago, when our then Health Minister went on the airwaves in some sort of internal party pincer movement.

Looking at the document before us, I find that the figures in it are effectively impenetrable, given the extremely limited information accompanying the spending lines.

That, along with the failure of the Department to brief the Committee, makes genuine scrutiny almost impossible, and that is something that, I hope, the Finance Minister will consider. Nevertheless, with the new Health Minister in place, an opportunity exists to address some of the long-standing concerns over the management of her Department's finances, not least the levels being spent on administration — something that, I see in today's Estimates, is set to increase yet again — but also other more practical steps, such as, once and for all, giving the Fire and Rescue Service the front-line status that it deserves. Those are not challenges that can be forgotten about; they must be addressed head-on. To do so, they must form part of the planning for the future system of healthcare in Northern Ireland.

Without a sure and stable financial footing, our health service will continue to lurch from crisis to crisis. Its staff continue to work in unprecedented conditions, and, as patients, our constituents are left to wait, worry and risk coming to even greater harm. If the Executive are serious about tackling the number one priority that they face — the deepest crisis since devolution was restored — I implore the Finance Minister to seek to set a sure footing for the finances of our health service for the long term.

Mr Lunn: Like everybody else, I welcome the Minister to his new post. I am sure that he will bring his normal energy and enthusiasm to the role. We may not see quite as many tweets from the towpath, although I am sure that he will get his exercise all the same.

This is a question of balance, is it not? It is about balance between promises and commitments made and resources available, with the need to eliminate waste and inefficiency thrown in. I am interested in the various views, particularly those that the Minister put forward in his opening remarks. He has indicated that he has no intention of allowing any revenue-raising opportunities. That is how it sounds to me. He mentioned student fees and water charges: we will not give him an argument there. However, is he opposed to all forms of revenue-raising, such as the removal of the rates cap, prescription charges or the removal of the link between the regional rate and the rate of inflation? There are opportunities there, but he seems to be very much in favour of borrowing; indeed, if the

Minister has met him, I am sure that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is still recovering.

Borrowing has its place; of course it does. The recent announcement of funding for housing associations from European funds — just to make the point, Mr Deputy Speaker — is very welcome. The more of that, perhaps, the better. It comes at a very advantageous rate of interest from the central bank. That is fair enough.

Mr Storey majored on job creation being the ultimate priority for the Assembly. I do not disagree with that at all, but the main lever — the silver bullet — for job creation remains corporation tax. No matter how many times I listen to Sinn Féin talk about corporation tax, I remain doubtful about what is going on.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Yes.

Mr Storey: I appreciate the comment that the Member made about the money recently secured from the European Investment Bank by Choice and Apex. Does he agree that, if we can get the issue of housing right, through a structure for the Housing Executive, the private sector and the housing associations — I trust that the Finance Minister will take this into account with his colleague in the Department for Communities — we will unleash the construction industry in Northern Ireland? Given the comments of the Ulster Bank today, the construction industry needs that help, and it will certainly be to the benefit of our constituents.

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

Mr Lunn: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank Mr Storey for that. I know that those things interlink: one benefit produces another benefit. That is sound thinking.

The impression from the DUP is that corporation tax is a done deal, and the impression that I get from Mr Murphy is that corporation tax will be a done deal. The comment from the Minister, I think, on the radio recently was that corporation tax was not yet a done deal.

If I were a businessman in charge of a multinational company and was approached in America, let us say, by Invest NI with a proposition, I would be looking years ahead at

these arrangements. In less than two years, this thing is supposed to be devolved, but we are not there yet. We should now be touring the world, as Minister McGuinness and the First Minister will obviously be doing, to promote this as a huge advantage to doing business in Northern Ireland, and we are not there yet. This thing could easily be postponed.

Mr Ó Muilleoir will know perfectly well that there is nothing that business hates more than uncertainty. You have to have certainty. You have to have infrastructure, a low wage base and all the factors that feed in, but uncertainty is the killer.

Look at the promises that have been made. A reduction in corporation tax is one; the abolition of air passenger duty is another. Somebody mentioned earlier £1 billion for the health service. Another figure that I saw recently in the 'Belfast Telegraph' was £1 billion for roads infrastructure. In fairness, I have not heard that from the Minister, but I have heard promises galore, particularly coming up to the election, when it seemed as though every substandard road in Northern Ireland was to be improved. It was promises galore; big money. I wonder how all this will balance.

Should we borrow first — borrow our way out of trouble — or should we be engaged, perhaps, in trying to eliminate waste and improve efficiency? I know that we bang on about this, but look at the costs of a divided society; they are there for all to see. Deloitte and various authorities come up with figures. I do not know what the correct figure is, but I imagine that if it was eliminated, it would cover that £1 billion for the health service for sure.

Look at the education system, and I am sure that others mentioned it today: we have maybe 70,000 empty desks in a school population of just over 300,000. That is close to 25%. I am not saying that eliminating that number of empty desks would eliminate the same proportion of schools that we do not need. If it did, it would be upwards of 200 schools. Now, I am not for one minute suggesting that that is a way to go, but there has to be some rationalisation eventually. Those are the decisions that we keep putting off. Here we are, after an election, with three years clear, perhaps, in which people do not need to worry quite so much about being re-elected, and it is really time to move on some of these things.

Others mentioned the health service and the clear demand there to take rational decisions and try to work within its budget. We cannot keep increasing the health service budget by

whatever the required figure is — some 6% a year. We just cannot do it. That is on top of the £1 billion, apparently. The money is not there; it will not be there. I do not believe that we can borrow our way out of that situation. In fact, it would be totally incomprehensible to me if we tried to do so.

Somebody mentioned the Prison Service, and there is a clear requirement to put more money into it; it has been starved of finance for far too long. I could mention Desertcreat. Where does that stand now? As far as I can see, it has gone from the Department of Justice, and now the Department of Health has to look after it, as it will be a Fire Service facility. How much money has been spent on Desertcreat already, and we have not yet cut a sod? Actually, we may have had a sod cutting; I am not sure, but, figuratively, we have not done anything about it.

Is the removal of the headquarters of what is now DAERA to Ballykelly to go ahead? Does anybody think that it actually makes sense in the present circumstances? We should be trying to merge those Departments —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a conclusion.

Mr Lunn: — not build a grandiose new facility in Ballykelly. It just does not make sense. Those are my questions to the Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I call the Minister of Finance, Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, to conclude and wind up the debate. The Minister has 47 minutes, and he kicks off, coincidentally, with events in France.

5.00 pm

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

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Kick-off, perhaps, is the correct metaphor. If it has not kicked off yet, I wish Martin O'Neill and na buachaillí glasa — his team — well in their match. The good news is that those of us who wish to see the second half of the game will certainly see it.

I thank all those who took part in the debate. There were many brickbats for other Ministers, and I will let some of those Ministers respond to those, whether it is the Economy Minister, the Health Minister or others, but I will try to address the issues that are central to my remit. If I may, I also thank the Committee Chair and the Committee, the Opposition and members of the DUP and Sinn Féin who allowed accelerated passage of this Bill.

I will start at the end, which means that Mrs Dobson can go and watch the game if she wishes. First, however, I appreciate Mr Lunn's candour, and I differentiate between — I do not know what to call it; maybe Mr Nesbitt can inform me — the junior coalition of the SDLP and the UUP and the Alliance Party, because the Alliance Party today had a raft of alternatives to the spending plans that we have and a series of suggestions. I am not saying that I agree with any of them; as you know, I am vehemently opposed to many of them, but still, there is in the Alliance Party an alternative way forward that is lacking in the other parties. I will begin at the end with Mr Lunn if I may, and I want to respond to as many points as possible.

In relation to corporation tax, I concur with my colleague Mr Murphy. We want to see corporation tax reduced. We have set the date and the rate, but everyone here agrees that we want to do that to create as many jobs as possible. Therefore, it is in our interests that the reduction to the block grant is kept to the minimum. There is no one here, in opposition or in the Government parties, who would like me not to get the best deal. Have the negotiations on that best deal started? No, they have not. This may be no surprise to those who followed the income tax discussion in Scotland. The deal on income tax with Scotland was made one month before the election. When I say that we should reboot or refresh the negotiations, my entreaty has gone off to the British Chancellor, Mr Osborne, to say that we need to start those negotiations. Mr Lunn is right; we need certainty and to bring those negotiations to a conclusion about the reduction in the block grant. That is where we are. Am I confident that it is achievable and affordable? Yes, but everyone here expects me to get the best deal possible, and that is what I intend to do.

I will move on to what Mrs Dobson had to say. She is right, although she and Mr Storey may disagree about the most vital issue for the Executive moving forward. Jobs and health are the building blocks, and while I am neither the Minister for the Economy nor the Minister of Health, it is my intention to ensure that when those Departments come seeking support, we find a way, with Executive colleagues, to support them. I echo Mrs Dobson's sentiments, and she can be sure that I will support the Health Minister in particular when she comes forward. However, let me say this: everybody here agrees that money is not the solution. It is not a case of throwing more money at Health. I have heard Members from every party saying that. We all agree that Professor Bengoa from Euskadi, the Basque country, is setting in front

of us an alternative to the blank cheque. The blank cheque will not work in health.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he also accept that herein lies the difficulty? I appreciate the comments he made in relation to the Alliance Party, one of the parties of opposition. However, in terms of what the Ulster Unionists are saying, if there is — there may be, and that is an issue for the Health Minister — at some stage a reduction, for example, in bureaucracy in the health service, the first people who will be standing on the picket line, signing a petition and putting out the press statement are the very same people who came into the House today and said that we have wonderful professionals but there has to be change. How do you square that circle? When will those parties start to be honest and tell us who it is that they want to sack or take off the payroll and the benefits that that will bring us?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I have more faith in the positions of everyone in the Chamber than my colleague. It is important that they have said that it is not just about money, and we will hold them to that. That said, we made a commitment pre-election — we will hold to it — to provide £1 billion extra for the health service, but in the context of understanding that there has to be real reform. We need to do this better, and we cannot continue to put more money into the system without better outcomes.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for giving way. He takes the position that no party wants to throw money at the health service, but we are committed to £1 billion. How does the Minister know it will be £1 billion? It could be more, or, if the reforms are very successful, it could be less. Why stick a stake in the ground that it must be £1 billion at this stage?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: We have made that commitment. I would be surprised if we could not improve the health service with that extra money, never mind stand still. If they are improvements, that is what they will be. We will spend the money on them, because there can always be enhancements to the health service. I have to say that the pressures in health make me believe two things: first, there will be calls for extra money, and, secondly, we need to get to grips with this and progress Professor Bengoa's proposals as quickly as possible.

Mrs Dobson referred to the "impenetrable" Estimates: I thought her colleague Steve Aiken did a fairly good job of penetrating the Estimates and drilling down and almost

performing an audit on them. That said, it seems to me that — I do not know whether we refer to them as the junior coalition; I presume I am allowed to — the UUP/SDLP coalition, if I was able use some of the language of Steve Aiken and compare the balance sheets, is weak on cohesion. There are no proposals on what we should do differently. It is very weak on costings, because there were no suggestions from our colleagues in the UUP or SDLP about where we should take money out of and move it to.

We have been there previously. My South Belfast colleague Ms Hanna, at the last debate on the Budget, proposed taking £800,000 from the Executive Office, which would have led to the closure of the victims and survivors unit. Of course, we faced that down. This time, however, they have not made one proposal to move money round in a £10 billion-plus budget. Although Mr Nesbitt called —

Ms Hanna: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Of course.

Ms Hanna: First of all, in the previous debate I did not say that; I proposed taking £800,000 from the extensive administration budget in OFMDFM, which had gone up year on year. We have made proposals, and tomorrow we will again. You choose to ignore them. My colleague in health set out some. We have set out things for childcare, and you ignore them as well. We also made a suggestion about zero-based budgeting. It should not be a case of "This is what we will do, because it is what we have always done"; we should start from day one. Will you respond to that specifically, rather than cherry-pick the things that you will and will not listen to?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I do not mind: the SDLP can have its cake and eat it on this one. If it was not to close down the victims and survivors unit by removing £800,000, it was to make 20 people redundant. You can take your pick, but removing £800,000 arbitrarily from what is now the Executive Office would have ended up with that conclusion. I am happy to take recommendations from Members on all sides about how we can do this process better. If they are about zero-based budgeting or a revised process, let us hear them all. However, this is still the core question for the junior coalition: where would they take the money from? I will respond later to Mr Attwood. If we said we wanted —

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; he has been very generous with his time. The Minister is right in the sense that, to be fair to the Alliance Party, it has had the gumption to outline some proposals. I do not agree with many of them, but at least they had the gumption to do so. In our constituency, the Minister will be aware, there are many elderly people who, although asset-rich, in that they live in expensive houses, are cash-poor. Does the Minister agree that the proposal to remove the rates cap would not hit millionaires but would, in a constituency like ours, hit pensioners, who can least afford it?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: We may come to rates later. It was interesting that, in a long debate on finances, Mr Lunn was perhaps the only one who touched on rates. No one else touched on rates, which is the one area where we can raise taxation.

In my view, the balance sheet of the government parties is strong on costings. The policies are there, and the costings are there. We are saying that this is what we want to do. It is strong on vision for a prosperous, shared society. It is strong on operations. We are saying that we think we can be more efficient as a Government and as Departments, and we will push Departments hard to see where savings can be made, such as by moving from 12 to nine Departments. We are prudent in borrowing, but we are also imaginative, and we will not close anything down.

In that respect, I note that Mr Durkan would like us to find a way for the Housing Executive to borrow money to build homes. I am in favour of that, but, of course, if it is on the balance sheet, it does not make any sense. The question and challenge for us as Members is this: do we have the genius and imagination to find a way to allow the Housing Executive to borrow hundreds of millions of pounds, if necessary, and then to pay that back on the basis of the homes and the income streams they create? I believe that it was the view of one of my colleagues on the Finance Committee that we should close up shop and go home because we could not do anything and Westminster held all the cards. I do not actually believe that. It has always been a truism in civil services across the world — I say this with respect to the Department for the Economy, the Department of Agriculture and everybody else — that the real cream is in finance. I believe that that is what we have here. I have no doubt that the team that we have in the Department of Finance will find the ways to grow the funding pie, borrow prudently and give us the funds that

we need to invest in the prosperous and shared job-rich future that we wish to create.

My friend, colleague and constituency comrade Claire Hanna made the comment that we are in the driving seat now. That is true: the government parties are in the driving seat. We have the responsibility and the obligation to make the numbers add up. We have the duty to deliver for all people, no matter whom they vote for, but there are also back-seat drivers who can chirp up. They can say, "Go this way" or "Go that way", but, when it comes to the tough terrain, it is up to the driver to make the judgement. When it comes to the tight corner, it is up to the driver to make the right call. When it comes to ensuring that we have vision and we can see straight ahead, again, that is for the Government. That is why we are in the driving seat. Those who wish to be in this seat have to do more than just speak and carp from the back seat. I look forward to that in the time ahead.

I will move to some of the many comments. I commend my young colleague Philip for making his maiden speech here today. Mr Smith makes a number of strong points. Having heard his maiden speech, I look forward to returning to those points and engaging with him in the time ahead. While he has been critical of the government parties, I think that we will find common ground on some of the things that he says. I will work with him. I went to the Finance Committee at the earliest opportunity. This is where we will part ways, Philip, if I may: your party was the enabler of austerity by supporting the Conservative Party in the 2010 election. That lit the fuse on this austerity nightmare that we have been enduring for the last six years, which has, as Nicola Sturgeon recently commented, added great burden and hardship for ordinary people. In my mind, whether you be Tory, Tory-lite or Ulster Unionist, it lacks credibility to come into the House and comment, carp and criticise the Government's policies when you enabled the Tory Government to wage this ideological austerity assault on our people. Yes, we will work together. Yes, I will take on board the points that you raised, especially, as Mrs Dobson said, with regard to health. However, I think that you are holed below the waterline with regard to credibility because of the endorsement and support that you gave — perhaps now you regret it — to the Conservative Party in the 2010 election.

I thank my colleague, the Chair of the Finance Committee, for her constructive remarks. I expect to be challenged by the Committee in the time ahead. We had a useful exchange. I hope to be back to consider other issues. You

talked about hope: we are here to give hope to our people. We intend to do that. You talked about a new energy that you feel in the Assembly, and I agree with that. I sat through the year of limbo here when some of you, like Mr Stalford, were lucky enough not to be here, but I see now a completely different approach in the Assembly. I welcome the fresh injection of energy that that has given to all our people in opposition and government parties.

Christopher Stalford talked about the social investment fund, which endured a number of brickbats from some of our friends. Mr Nesbitt described it as a disaster. Ms Hanna criticised how the decisions were taken. I have asked for the figures on the social investment fund. In my view, we are getting it right. Was it good enough or fast enough? No. Do I intend it to be better? Yes. But we are getting it right.

5.15 pm

So, was it a disaster? Taughmonagh healthy business centre — £1.1 million, commenced and detailed design, and the cost being finalised prior to contractor procurement; Sandy Row resource centre — £1 million, commenced and contractor procurement due to commence; increased community service at Sure Start Taughmonagh — £51,000, letter of offer issued; increased community service at Sure Start Belvoir and Milltown — £329,000, letter of offer issued. That is only in south Belfast. I could go on and read some of the other areas, and I note that, in east Belfast, Bryson Street surgery got £1 million, and the build is complete and operational. Am I, as Finance Minister, going to insist that procurement is done more quickly and that we find faster, more efficient ways, while being very careful with the public purse to do these things? Yes, I am going to insist on a fresh approach to this, but to describe that sort of money going into working-class communities as a disaster beggars belief.

The Survivors and Victims of Institutional Abuse (SAVIA) came up several times today. I have worked with that group and consider some of them friends and all of them heroes. I believe that it is incumbent on us to find a way to make sure that we offer redress for the terrible horror that they suffered from those who were given positions of responsibility by society. Discussions are continuing. We are following the inquiry. It is up to the Executive Office to come forward with plans, and I look forward to this, but I say to my colleagues and friends in SAVIA that we are with you, we support and admire what you are doing. We can never bring the horror that they suffered to a close, but I hope that we can bring to a conclusion the

inquiry and some proposals around that as soon as possible.

There were some questions about Excess Votes and so on, which were technical matters. I think that we will leave those.

I note that Mr Nesbitt mentioned the pay claims of former NIO staff in the settlement of the Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay claims. He is right: those are works in progress. Discussions are continuing, and if Mr Nesbitt or anyone else wants to come and meet me on those issues, which came up on the doorsteps, as we all know, I am very happy to do that.

Maidir le mo chomrádaí, Barra Mac Giolla Duibh, nach bhfuil anseo anois, creidim; tá sé ar shiúl leis ag amharc ar an pheil ar ndóighe, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Ach ba mhaith liom a rá go nglacaim ar bórd gach rud a dúirt mo chara atá ar iarraidh anois. Agus tá súil agam, de bharr an chaiteachais atá leagtha amach sna Meastacháin Soláthair seo, go ndéanfar an infheistíocht i seirbhísí poiblí ar ardchaighdeán, agus, ar ndóighe, mar a dúirt seisean, sna bóithre agus i gcúrsaí oideachais. Déanfar sin. Barry McElduff's absence is noted. There must be a football match on. I do not believe he calls it football — there must be a soccer match on. I am committed to doing what I can to ensure that rural roads maintenance gets the funding it needs within the constraints of budgets because we cannot and do not have enough money to do everything we want to do.

John O'Dowd is giving up the football match and is still here. That is a fealty that I have not seen very often in politics, but I take on board his remarks about the financial restraints that we are under, and if we are going to talk about teams, I should say that, in joining up with our colleagues in Scotland and Wales, I will be meeting Derek Mackay, the Finance Minister of Scotland, on Wednesday evening and Mark Drakeford, the Finance Minister of Wales, on Thursday morning. When are they playing the English? Does anyone know? I do not know what sort of mood Mark Drakeford will be in Wales, but I believe very much in this trilateral approach. We have many things in common.

Taking on board what Mr Attwood and Mr Durkan said about austerity, no one should think that we have stopped the austerity juggernaut from Westminster and the Tories. There are all sorts of ways, and Mr Durkan touched on some of them, in which they will continue to pick at and try to undermine our Budgets, but, for me, one of the important things is that we are in frequent contact with our colleagues, friends and fellow Celts in Wales

and Scotland so that we can push against the people who got fewer than 10,000 votes in the last election.

I note that Mr O'Dowd also mentioned the extra money, which is mentioned elsewhere, for shared and integrated education capital build, and I welcome that.

Stephen Farry wants the process slowed down; the Budget is too fast. I have spent the last 16 months in this place asking people to do things faster while maintaining that they have to be done properly. So I would have thought that everyone would welcome the process of the Estimates and the Supply resolution being speeded up, but not so.

I think that the Committee agreed to the Bill getting accelerated passage because it studied the proposal that we put in front of it and realised that that was the best way forward. Therefore, although I may agree with some of the stuff that Mr Farry says, I cannot agree to slow the process down. I think that we need to move on.

Some Members mentioned the monitoring round. I am sworn to secrecy. Although Mr Attwood indicated that Barry McElduff may have let the cat out of the bag, I cannot say what will be in the monitoring round. It will be announced tomorrow. Mr Farry made some commitments. I know that he would be pleased if those commitments that he made before leaving office were honoured, because he, like me, believes in investing in higher education and that having corporation tax without skills and infrastructure is not good enough. I will be doing, and have been doing, my very best on that, not for Mr Farry or me but for our young people, to ensure that we get the jobs that we want to see. The issue of skills is very important for me. He is aware that, in the 2016-17 Budget, we committed an extra £5 million for the skills enhancement agenda. The previous Finance Minister stated that his intention was to make the first £20 million of resource DEL available in June monitoring. That is an IOU that the former Minister left for me. Hopefully, we can make some progress in that regard tomorrow.

Mr Farry said that there will be a Division, which caused some dismay to Members who were maybe hoping to get home for the football or to watch it somewhere else. I saw the alert go out — no one is allowed to leave the Building — and he will be voting against the motion. The interesting thing is that this is not the first debate, and some Members — those who were fortunate enough, or unfortunate enough, to be

here in January and February — will realise that some of the arguments have been rehearsed. At that time, although the SDLP, the UUP and the Alliance Party voted against the motions on the Budget, the Supply resolutions and the Vote on Account, Stephen Farry abstained. I do not know whether it is progress or whether we are going backwards that, tonight, you are going to vote against the motion, but we will take that —

Dr Farry: I was the Minister at the time.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: You were the Minister at the time.

Dr Farry: Ministerial code.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar — tá sé i bhfad ró-fhada, mar a thuigeann tú. Jonathan Bell, when speaking publicly, has twice now addressed the issue of housing waiting lists and the very real hardship and misery that lie behind not having a home. Those of us who support families realise that you cannot really have a family unless you have a home. We talked about the big issues of health and jobs, but housing is a priority issue. When it comes to borrowing prudently, I think that all of us will welcome the European Investment Bank loans to Apex and Choice last week to enable them to build more homes. People here who have concerns about borrowing should allow us to see whether there are ways in which we can make sure that, for example, the Housing Executive can borrow so that we build more homes. I take on board Mr Bell's comments on homelessness. I hope that we return to the issue, because we need reminded at every turn about how important it is. I also take on board his other two comments. One was about the challenges in the Budget: that we do not have enough money to do what we want to do. The other was about our determination to make sure that jobs, and the creation of jobs, are central to everything that we do.

Mr Durkan, I think, opened a door and agreed with me that we need to find a way of maximising borrowing for organisations such as the NIHE that cannot borrow at the minute. I think that he had a swipe at the Fresh Start Agreement, but, of course, not so long ago, we all supported the Fresh Start Agreement. I am not sure at the minute where the SDLP is on key elements of the Fresh Start Agreement. Certainly, those of us who signed up to the Fresh Start Agreement and the Stormont House Agreement are going to honour them.

We should make it clear that the European Investment Bank loans last week are very welcome. We should have a really positive and almost daily dialogue with the European Investment Bank. It is involved in the NI investment fund, but there are other ways in which to work with the EIB, and I have already asked my officials to start looking at the potential for European Investment Bank framework loans to support local council investment here. I take on board what Mr Storey said about some councils being at different levels. I agree with Paula Bradshaw, who said that Belfast City Council is leading the way on those matters, and we should not hold it back. In fact, I think that we have a lot to learn from Belfast City Council. I am not saying that because Christopher, Claire and Paula were on the council not so long ago, but I do think that we have a lot to learn from Belfast City Council's alacrity in getting things done.

Mr Durkan referred to the welfare reform mitigations, but Mr Attwood attacked the deal that we did on welfare mitigations. In my view, we set aside over £500 million, and we have a panel that is making recommendations on how that money should be used. We know that tax credits did not go ahead, so we have a bit of space there. Someone said earlier — maybe from the Ulster Unionist Party — that it is a big commitment from our society to say that we will have the most generous welfare mitigation package in these islands. It is a big commitment from the supporters of the DUP, the supporters of Sinn Féin, and the supporters of the other parties that support that package. Those who do not support it should say what they want it reduced to. If the Ulster Unionist Party wants to attack the welfare mitigation deal, it can say how much it wants to take off. If Mr Attwood or others think that we should be doing more, let them state how much more we should put into the welfare mitigations and where it should come from. That is the missing element again and again today, with the exception of the Alliance Party, which dealt in broad strokes. Neither the UUP nor the SDLP, when they called for more money, including £20 million for childcare, said where we will take it from. Does it come from the universities, the arts or the hospitals? Who will provide the money for us to do all the things that we want to do? Thus, those of us who are in the driving seat have to make those tough decisions, and we have made them in this Supply resolution and in these Estimates today.

I do not know whether mo chomrádaí Daithí McKay is still here, but it would be above and beyond if he is missing the football match to be here. He raised important points about the

delivery of health services, and I take those on board. We have made very bold commitments to health, not only in trying to provide extra money to the tune of £1 billion but in insisting that we will stand by the need to restructure and reform health along with Professor Bengoa. It is vital, therefore, that any reforms identified as a result of the work led by Professor Bengoa be implemented with the support of the Executive. I would go broader than that and would like to see the support of the Opposition for those reforms, but let us see how that develops.

Barry McElduff and Daithí McKay mentioned rural communities. I have not had an official visit yet to a rural community, but it has come up. That is unless we think that Enniskillen is a rural community. It did come up at a meeting in Enniskillen with the chief executive of the council who said that — you will understand this, a LeasCheann Comhairle, as it is your constituency as well as that of others — we have to ensure that rural communities get a full share of this peace dividend.

The derating of sports clubs is an issue on which Mr McKay has majored and which the Finance Committee spent most of last year discussing. I can update the Assembly on it. My Department recently completed a consultation to inform drafting regulations to allow 100% rate relief to be given to unlicensed community amateur sports clubs. The new legislation will be presented to the Finance Committee prior to my asking the Assembly to approve it in September. Qualifying clubs will then have to apply for enhanced relief. At the very latest, this will take effect in the next financial year, but I will be asking Land and Property Services to explore options for implementation for the remainder of the current year, bearing in mind that, legally, it cannot be backdated.

Looking beyond that, I will also ask my officials to look at more fundamental changes that can be made to the treatment of amateur sports clubs as part of the wider review of rating policy to ensure that reliefs are better targeted. All of us realise in our constituencies that the sports clubs do absolutely magnificent work. Perhaps that was undervalued in the past. Part of building up strong, vibrant, dynamic communities is, I think, getting behind sports clubs even more vigorously, and hopefully these proposals on rate relief to sports clubs will help.

Michaela Boyle spoke about domestic violence. That issue came up in a discussion between the new Justice Minister and me earlier today, because it is an issue that she has expressed a

real interest in and is determined to focus on. I am happy to work positively with the Justice Minister if she comes forward with additional proposals that need further funding.

I take on board all Paula Bradshaw's points about the Programme for Government, the main thrust of which was that the Programme for Government and the next Budget need to be aligned. We will come forward in the autumn with a Budget for resource from 2017-2020 and for capital from 2017-2021, and we need to make sure that there is joined-up government.

People will have different views about the priorities in the Programme for Government, but one thing that the public will not forgive us for is if we come forward with a Budget for the period ahead that is not wedded to the Programme for Government. I like the word "reimagining". I might steal that. I might not use it in exactly the same context, but I think that we have to reimagine. It is a new era, it is a fresh start, and there is a new look and feel to the Assembly. If that means reimagining the way we approach all the tasks ahead, I think that we should do so.

5.30 pm

Steve Aiken had the temerity to mention Brexit, which, as Minister, I will not comment on, but you know the Sinn Féin position that it would be a severe setback to our society if Brexit were to succeed. He made fair points about how we prepare for the outcome on 23 June. It is around the corner and is on top of us, but let us follow that carefully and see what happens. We will then be able to take our counsel on 24 June. Members have their own opinions, and, of course, the House is split on that issue.

I have a very complex response on Excess Votes, which Ms Hanna and Steve Aiken brought up. Claire, I think that you should ask for a meeting with me or the officials rather than me reading that out tonight. They are technical matters; they are paper transfers. Would you like me to —

Ms Hanna: You could email it to me.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I will email it to you. OK.

Alex Attwood — I think that two people suggested that budgets are going to unravel — I do not know whether it was Mr Farry who used that word — and that there is maybe a need for additional statements. I can assure you that we are in control of the budgets and that I am

content with where we are, with the caveat that we do not have enough money.

Budgets, especially resource budgets, are continuing to be squeezed, and the austerity juggernaut has not stopped. I do not use that just for the rhetoric; I use it because, when we unite with one voice, we can halt that juggernaut. You saw that in Britain, where one voice united against an assault on disability payments and stopped the austerity agenda. I want to elevate the commentary about austerity above rhetoric and stress to my colleagues that, with one voice — hopefully with our colleagues in Scotland and Wales — we need to say to London that that is not the way to build the peace or strong societies and that they cannot come back and cut budgets. I assure Mr Attwood that there will not be a further statement to the House. I am content that we will have an interesting monitoring round in the morning and will then push on towards the next big challenge with the Budget in September.

Mr Attwood mentioned the Ulster Bank index and said that he was talking about today and not May, but of course, it is the May index. That is why we mentioned it. Mr Nesbitt mentioned it. I did not mention it. Actually, I did because I have the email, but I read the bit about April. I always take cognisance of economists, but we should not let them be the only source for our policymaking or our strategies. As we are in the throes and the maw of the Brexit referendum, no one will be surprised that there is a lack of confidence, but I note from the Ulster Bank index today that we are still moving forward.

I look forward to the June monitoring round tomorrow. I do not know where the feeling that there may be some issues came from. I think that there will be a positive June monitoring round in the morning. I reiterate what I said about SAVIA: my commitment to SAVIA continues.

Mr Attwood also asked about the budget for the A5. I am confident that if we do not spend that money this year for different reasons, especially if they relate to the Planning Appeals Commission's public inquiry, that it will be spent in this mandate. That is a bold statement: we will deliver the A5 and A6 in this mandate.

We are surely coming to the close. Mervyn Storey is more laudatory of the British Government than I would be. That may surprise people. He lionises their commitment. It is my view and conviction — we mentioned it at the Committee last week — that the link to Britain is not to our advantage and that our

economy would be much more prosperous if the decisions were not made outwith this place, but we will move on from that. The one thing that I will agree with Mervyn Storey on is that we will focus on jobs. The Estimates are not just Estimates for health and education. They are also Estimates for entrepreneurs, for small and medium-sized enterprises, and for larger investment.

I note the hammer blows that his constituency has suffered over the last 18 months, with major manufacturers closing.

Lastly, I do not know whether we have any news from the football game.

A Member: Nil-nil.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Nil-nil. In that case, I want to draw my remarks to a close. I thank Members for their good wishes. I am sure that you will not be just so temperate and considerate in your comments in the time ahead, when we get into this role properly. It is a big privilege, and I believe that I have the good wishes of all of the House. We may disagree, but it is my conviction that, at the end of the day, we want the best for our people and our constituents.

Assembly approval of the Supply motion today and the associated departmental expenditure plans laid out in the 2016-17 Main Estimates is a crucial stage of the existing public expenditure cycle. Failure to pass the 2016-17 Supply resolution at this juncture would have serious consequences for the ongoing provision of public services.

I do not think there has been a Division on the Estimates in some time, Mr Farry, but that is what democracy is all about. Le do chead, a LeasCheann Comhairle, sílim go dtáinig mé isteach beagán faoin am, ba mhaith liom an rún seo a mholadh don Tionól, agus tá súil agam go nglacfar leis. I commend the motion to the Assembly and beg to move.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the vote on this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that resources, not exceeding £69,281,105.15 be authorised for use by the Department of Finance and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, for the

year ending 31 March 2015, as summarised in part II of the 2014-15 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): As there are Ayes from all side of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

We will now move to the motion on the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2016-17, which has already been debated. Glaoim ar an Aire Airgeadais. I call the Minister of Finance.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Le do chead, a LeasCheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom an Bille Cáinainéise uimhir a dó a chur i láthair an Tionóil. I beg to introduce the Budget (No. 2) Bill. Have we agreed the previous one?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): No. Can I ask you to move the motion on the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2016-17, le do thoil?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I beg to move:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,986,369,200, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017; and that resources, not exceeding £8,693,136,600, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 that was laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the vote on the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 56; Noes 10.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Ms Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms Dillon, Ms Fearon, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hazzard, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McKay, Mr McMullan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan.

UNIONIST:

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Irwin, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr O'Dowd and Mr Robinson.

NOES

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister.

OTHER:

Mr Agnew, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Bradshaw and Mr Dickson.

Total Votes	66	Total Ayes	56	[84.8%]
Nationalist Votes	25	Nationalist Ayes	25	[100.0%]
Unionist Votes	32	Unionist Ayes	31	[96.9%]
Other Votes	9	Other Ayes	0	[0.0%]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,986,369,200, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the

year ending 31 March 2017; and that resources, not exceeding £8,693,136,600, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 that was laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016.

Budget (No. 2) Bill 2016: First Stage

Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance): Mar sin arís, a LeasCheann Comhairle, le do chead, ba mhaith liom an Bille Cáinainéise uimhir a dó Thuaisceart Éireann a chur i láthair an Tionóil. I beg to move the Budget (No. 2) Bill 2016 [01/16-21], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the year ending 31st March 2017; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources (including accruing resources) for the year ending 31st March 2017; to authorise the use of certain excess resources for the year ending 31st March 2015; and to repeal certain spent provisions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That constitutes the Bill's First Stage, and it shall now be printed. The Speaker is satisfied that the Bill is within the legislative competence of the Assembly, and I can inform Members that confirmation has been received from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance, in accordance with Standing Order 42(2), that the Committee is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill, and that the Bill can therefore proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

Adjourned at 5.54 pm.

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