



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 14 January 2020

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Speaker:** Good morning, Members. Maidin mhaith.

At the last sitting, it was announced that Mr Matthew O'Toole had been returned as a Member for South Belfast. For clarity, I would like to add that Mr O'Toole gave the undertaking, signed the Roll of Membership and entered his designation in the presence of the Speaker and the Clerk/Chief Executive just before the sitting on Saturday 11 January. That is just for the record. Of course, the Member is welcome.

### Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

**Mr Speaker:** This item relates to Question Time rescheduling.

**Mr Butler:** I beg to move

*That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 14 January 2020.*

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

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 14 January 2020.*

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

### Statutory Committees

**Mr Speaker:** As this is a business motion, there will be no debate.

*Resolved:*

*That, in accordance with Standing Orders 46 and 47, this Assembly determines that nine Statutory Committees shall be established as follows:*

*the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs;*  
*the Committee for Communities;*  
*the Committee for the Economy;*  
*the Committee for Education;*  
*the Committee for the Executive Office;*  
*the Committee for Finance;*  
*the Committee for Health;*  
*the Committee for Infrastructure; and*  
*the Committee for Justice.*

*Terms of reference, quorum and composition of the Committees shall be as prescribed in Standing Orders 48 and 49. — [Mr Butler.]*

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I notice that the motion that we have just passed ties itself to Standing Orders 48 and 49. In consequence, does that mean that the Statutory Committees are going to continue with a membership of 11, because that is what, of course, those Standing Orders say?

**Mr Speaker:** The composition of the Committees is under consideration by the Business Committee, Mr Allister, so that will be a matter for further consideration by the Business Committee and, therefore, the House after that.

**Mr Allister:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, it is not a matter for the Business Committee to change Standing Orders, surely, and, if Standing Orders provide for 11, the only manner in which you can avoid 11 is either to change Standing Orders or to suspend Standing Orders. Are we getting to the point where we will suspend that Standing Order?

**Mr Speaker:** I will make this the final ruling: the Business Committee will consider that and bring it back to the House for further

consideration. At the moment, the membership will remain at 11 until further change by the House.

## **Statutory Committees: Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons**

**Mr Speaker:** In accordance with the procedure set out in Standing Order 48, I shall ask the nominating officer of each political party, in the order required by the formula contained in Standing Order 48, to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his or her party and a Member of the Assembly to be the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson. I remind parties of the requirement of Standing Order 48(5) that nominating officers shall prefer Committees in which they do not have a party interest over those in which they do. For the avoidance of doubt, that means I will expect parties to refrain as far as possible from selecting Committees that coincide with the ministerial offices held by their party.

I now call on Arlene Foster, as nominating officer of the party that has the highest figure under the formula, to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

**Mrs Foster:** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I choose the Justice Committee, and I nominate Paul Givan to be the Chairman.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Givan:** Yes, Mr Speaker.

*Mr Paul Givan appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on John O'Dowd to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a Member to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We select the Economy Committee and appoint Caoimhe Archibald to that post.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Dr Archibald:** I am, a Cheann Comhairle.

*Dr Caoimhe Archibald appointed Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call again on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

**Mrs Foster:** I select the Communities Committee and select Paula Bradley as the Chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms P Bradley:** I am, Mr Speaker.

*Ms Paula Bradley appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Communities.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call again on John O'Dowd to select and nominate.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We select the Health Committee and appoint Colm Gildernew to that post.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Gildernew:** Tá mé, I am a Cheann Comhairle.

*Mr Colm Gildernew appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Health.*

**Mr Speaker:** I now call on Mrs Dolores Kelly to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a Member to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. We select the Committee for the Executive Office, and I nominate Colin McGrath as Chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr McGrath:** I am, Mr Speaker.

*Mr Colin McGrath appointed Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office.*

**Mr Speaker:** I now call on Steve Aiken to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a Member to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

**Mr Butler:** Mr Speaker, in line with Standing Orders, I will make the nomination. Is that OK?

**Mr Speaker:** You are saying that you are making the nomination.

**Mr Butler:** Yes, Mr Speaker. I sent a letter in this morning.

**Mr Speaker:** Did we receive that letter? We will just pause for a moment or two. I do not have sight of that. We do not have sight of that letter. Was it first-class post or second-class post?

**Dr Aiken:** You hope this is a transference, but we are not doing that. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Speaker:** You will just have to take your ease for a minute or two, Members. Sorry about this. It is a legal requirement.

Members, we can recommence. Steve, could you confirm that you have conferred to Robbie the responsibility of nominating officer?

**Dr Aiken:** For this one thing, Mr Speaker, I indeed confer the responsibility to my Chief Whip, Robbie Butler.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you very much. I now call on Robbie Butler to select and nominate.

**Mr Butler:** My apologies, Mr Speaker. I delivered it to the wrong office. I probably would not make a good postperson.

We take the Committee for Finance, and I nominate Steve Aiken. *[Applause.]*

*[Laughter.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Some Members:** No. *[Laughter.]*

**Dr Aiken:** Delighted to, chief.

*Dr Steve Aiken appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Finance.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call again on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

**Mrs Foster:** I select the Committee for Infrastructure, and I nominate Michelle McIlveen as Chairperson.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Miss McIlveen:** I am, Mr Speaker.

*Miss Michelle McIlveen appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call again on John O'Dowd to select and nominate.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We select the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, and we appoint Declan McAleer.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr McAleer:** Tá, yes, a Cheann Comhairle.

*Mr Declan McAleer appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.*

**Mr Speaker:** I now call on Kellie Armstrong to select and nominate, please.

**Ms Armstrong:** We choose the Department of Education and Mr Chris Lyttle to be Chair of that Committee.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Lyttle:** Yes, Mr Speaker.

*Mr Chris Lyttle appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Education.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

**Mrs Foster:** I select the Finance Committee, and I nominate Paul Frew as the vice chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Frew:** I am, Mr Speaker.

*Mr Paul Frew appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance.*

**10.45 am**

**Mr Speaker:** I call on John O'Dowd to select and nominate.

**Mr O'Dowd:** We select the vice chair of the Justice Committee and appoint Linda Dillon to that position.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms Dillon:** I am, a Cheann Comhairle.

*Ms Linda Dillon appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Dolores Kelly to select and nominate.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. We select the Department for the Economy and, as vice chair, Sinead McLaughlin.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms McLaughlin:** I am, Mr Speaker.

*Ms Sinead McLaughlin appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

**Mrs Foster:** I select the Health Committee and nominate Gary Middleton as the vice chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Middleton:** I am, Mr Speaker.

*Mr Gary Middleton appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on John O'Dowd to select and nominate.

**Mr O'Dowd:** We select the vice chair of the Education Committee and appoint Karen Mullan.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms Mullan:** Yes, a Cheann Comhairle.

*Ms Karen Mullan appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Robbie Butler to select and nominate.

**Mr Butler:** We — *[Interruption.]* We select the Executive Office and nominate Mike Nesbitt.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I am.

*Mr Mike Nesbitt appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

**Mrs Foster:** I choose the Committee for Infrastructure, and I appoint David Hilditch as the vice chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Hilditch:** Yes, Mr Speaker.

*Mr David Hilditch appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on John O'Dowd to select and nominate.

**Mr O'Dowd:** We select the vice chair of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee and appoint Philip McGuigan.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr McGuigan:** Tá, a Cheann Comhairle. Yes.

*Mr Philip McGuigan appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Kellie Armstrong to select and nominate.

**Ms Armstrong:** Mr Speaker, for the final vice chair, the Department for Communities, the Alliance Party's nomination is myself, Kellie Armstrong.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated? *[Laughter.]*

**Ms Armstrong:** Yes.

**Mr Speaker:** I sort of thought you would.

*Ms Kellie Armstrong appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities.*

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the appointment of the Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of the Statutory Committees.

## **Standing Committees: Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons**

**Mr Speaker:** I am required to supervise the appointment of a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson to each Standing Committee other than the Business Committee, in accordance with the procedure set out in Standing Order 51. I shall ask the nominating officer for each political party, in the order required by the formula in Standing Order 51(2), to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his or her party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

Before we commence, I remind Members of the requirement of Standing Order 56(3) that neither the Chairperson nor Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee shall be a member of the same political party as the Minister of Finance or of any junior Minister appointed to the Department of Finance.

I now call on Mrs Arlene Foster, as nominating officer of the party which has the highest figure under the formula laid down in Standing Orders, to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

**Mrs Foster:** I choose the Public Accounts Committee, and I nominate William Humphrey as Chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Humphrey:** I am, Mr Speaker.

*Mr William Humphrey appointed Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on John O'Dowd to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We select the Standards and

Privileges Committee and appoint Sinéad Ennis.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms Ennis:** I am, a Cheann Comhairle.

*Ms Sinéad Ennis appointed Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

**Mrs Foster:** I select the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and nominate Mervyn Storey as Chairperson. I understand that Mr Storey has submitted a letter to the Speaker's Office, because, unfortunately, he has a family bereavement and cannot be here today.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Mrs Foster. I have received correspondence from Mervyn Storey that he is willing to accept the nomination.

*Mr Mervyn Storey appointed Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.*

**Mr Speaker:** On behalf of the Assembly, I extend our condolences to Mervyn on the death of his father.

I call on John O'Dowd to select and nominate.

**Mr O'Dowd:** A Cheann Comhairle, we select the Procedures Committee and appoint Carál Ní Chuilín.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Glacaim. I accept, a Cheann Comhairle.

*Ms Carál Ní Chuilín appointed Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Dolores Kelly to select and nominate.

**Mrs D Kelly:** We select the Audit Committee and nominate Daniel McCrossan.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr McCrossan:** I am, Mr Speaker.

*Mr Daniel McCrossan appointed Chairperson of the Audit Committee.*

**Mr Speaker:** I now call on Steve Aiken to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person for a post.

**Dr Aiken:** We nominate Roy Beggs to the Public Accounts Committee.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Beggs:** I am willing to take up the office of vice Chair.

*Mr Roy Beggs appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

**Mrs Foster:** I select the Standards and Privileges Committee, and I nominate William Irwin as vice Chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Irwin:** I am, Mr Speaker.

*Mr William Irwin appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on John O'Dowd to select and nominate.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We select the vice Chair of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and appoint Maolíosa McHugh.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr McHugh:** Glacaim leis sin. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Speaker:** Maith go leor. Thank you.

*Mr Maolíosa McHugh appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Kellie Armstrong to select and nominate.

**Ms Armstrong:** We choose the Audit Committee and appoint Andrew Muir as vice Chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr Muir:** I am.

*Mr Andrew Muir appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee.*

**Mr Speaker:** I call on Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

**Mrs Foster:** The Procedures Committee is what is left, and I nominate Tom Buchanan as vice Chair.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

**Mr T Buchanan:** I am, Mr Speaker.

*Mr Thomas Buchanan appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.*

That concludes the appointment of the Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of the Standing Committees.

## **Standing Order 79(2): Suspension**

**Mr Butler:** I beg to move

*That Standing Order 79(2) be suspended for 14 January 2020.*

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

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*That Standing Order 79(2) be suspended for 14 January 2020.*

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

## **Assembly Commission Appointments**

**Mr Speaker:** As with similar motions, this motion will be treated as a business motion. There will be no debate. I remind Members that

Standing Orders require that such a motion be approved with cross-community support.

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

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

*The Speaker (ex officio)*  
*Ms Kellie Armstrong*  
*Mr Robbie Butler*  
*Mrs Pam Cameron*  
*Mrs Dolores Kelly*  
*Mr John O'Dowd — [Mr Butler.]*

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

## **Election of the Principal Deputy Speaker**

**Mr Speaker:** The next item of business is the election of a Principal Deputy Speaker. The process will be conducted in accordance with Standing Order 5A. I will begin by asking for a nomination. Any Member may rise to nominate one of the Deputy Speakers to act as Principal Deputy Speaker. I will then confirm that the person nominated is willing to act as Principal Deputy Speaker, and then a debate relevant to that nomination may take place. The Business Committee has agreed that only one Member should speak on behalf of each party in the debate. They will be allowed up to three minutes each. At the end of the debate, I will put the Question on the nomination. The vote will be on a cross-community basis. Of course, if the proposal is not carried, I shall ask for a further nomination and the process may be repeated.

Do I have a proposal for a Deputy Speaker to be nominated to be Principal Deputy Speaker? Members should rise in their place.

**Ms Mallon:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Just a few days ago, a number of parties signed up to the 'New Decade, New Approach' agreement and entered the Executive in good faith. That is signalling a new approach through being inclusive and power-sharing. There is no purpose or point to this item other than to confer an elevated title on one of three Deputy Speakers.

**Mr Speaker:** That is not a point of order.

**Ms Mallon:** If I could just very quickly make the point. We are just making the point that we do not support it and that —

**Mr Speaker:** It is not a point of order. You will have three minutes to speak to the motion. OK? Thank you.

**Mr Lyons:** I nominate Mr Christopher Stalford to the post of Principal Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Deputy Speaker, do you agree to act as Principal Deputy Speaker?

**Mr Stalford:** Yes, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. Standing Orders provide for a debate to take place on the nomination. Members may speak only once in the debate. Standing Order 5A(7) requires the debate to be relevant to the nomination. I will not allow Members to stray into any other area. Members will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

I call the Member who made the nomination, Gordon Lyons.

**Mr Lyons:** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. On behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party, I am delighted to be able to nominate Mr Christopher Stalford to the position of Principal Deputy Speaker.

I know Christopher, and I have known him for quite a number of years. I know how committed he is to his constituents and to serving in public life, and I have no doubt that, if the House agrees to make him Principal Deputy Speaker, he will serve, and he will serve well, in this place. He does, of course, have previous experience of chairing debates, having served as a Deputy Lord Mayor of Belfast.

Mr Speaker, I know it is not the tradition in the House for the Speaker to wear a wig or robes. That may well change if the Deputy Speaker whom I am nominating has his way.

I say that by way of warning, and I hope that that will not turn off any Members from supporting him. All joking aside, however, we have confidence in his abilities. We have confidence in his impartiality and know that he will provide a good service to the House and the people of Northern Ireland in the role.

**11.00 am**

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call the next Member to speak, I want to make a point for the benefit of all Members. I address this directly to Mr Colin McGrath. There will be plenty of opportunities in the House for Members who feel aggrieved or who disagree with any ruling by the Speaker to have their say, but I will not tolerate you, Member McGrath, or anybody else coming up to the back of the podium and insulting the Speaker in the middle of a plenary debate. I will not accept that. In future, I will take action. *[Interruption.]* Order. I want Members to take note of that. That is twice in two days that it has happened involving the Member, and that is why I am taking the unusual step of saying that I will not allow such behaviour to continue. *[Interruption.]* Order in the House.

**Ms Mallon:** A few days ago, a number of parties signed up to the 'New Decade, New Approach' agreement, in the sense that it was the basis on which we were entering the Executive in good faith. It is, we believe, adopting a new way of doing politics, which is one based on inclusivity and genuine power-sharing.

There is no purpose or point to this business other than to confer, as I said earlier, an elevated title on one of three Deputy Speakers, all of whom hold equal roles. It represents, sadly, a continuation of a past decade and a past approach, and we cannot support it.

I want to make the point, however, that this is in no way a reflection on or related to Mr Christopher Stalford, whom our party fully supports and has faith in. It is not the appointment of Mr Stalford that we disagree with but the title that is to be conferred on him.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Ms Armstrong:** The Alliance Party has opposed this role each time that it has come up, for the reasons that have already been spelt out. It is an honorary title. Our opposition is no reflection on any of the three Deputy Speakers. We just feel that, in this day and age, it is not right to elevate someone above the other Deputy Speakers when that is not the case. There is no money attached to the position. There is no privilege or prestige to it other than a title. Therefore, the Alliance Party will be opposing any nominations.

**Mr Allister:** As has been said correctly, this is a non-post. It is sheerly a post for vanity purposes to emphasise the carve-up between the two main parties.

I remind Members that the post was specially created in 2011 not because of need or because of any compulsion to help the running of the House but as a sop to Sinn Féin and to give someone a title. Of course, some from the Sinn Féin Benches in a former life enjoyed titles and are perhaps finding it difficult to live without them. We therefore created the preposterous post of Principal Deputy Speaker, as if inserting the word "Principal" bestowed any powers over and above those that exist for any Deputy Speaker. The Principal Deputy Speaker has no powers, no rights, no authority and no standing above any other Deputy Speaker, so why do we have the title? It is a title that is a nonsense in itself and is but, as I said, a perpetuation of the carve-up in this House.

Mr Stalford, I am sure, will carry off the role with great aplomb. It may not have been the title that he was hoping for, as he may have been hoping for that of junior Minister in the Executive Office. However, the crumbs are better, he may think, than nothing, although I would tell him that "nothing" is a very good place to be in this House.

**Mr Givan:** May I just say that this position is akin to a similar position that exists in Westminster? It is not unusual for there to be a distinguishing feature among the Deputy Speakers there, so this is not something that should cause any concern, particularly to unionists in the House.

In respect of the nomination of Christopher Stalford, he and I go back many years, to the Young Democrats of the Democratic Unionist Party. I first met him when I was 15. We sat together in a school debate in Belfast City Hall, Mr Speaker — a place that you will have been familiar with. I am not sure whether you chaired those proceedings. At that point, Christopher and I ended up sitting beside each other, and we had a very successful tag team debating event. I am sure that the behaviour that Christopher demonstrated there will not be repeated as Principal Deputy Speaker and that he will be on his best behaviour in the House. I have no doubt that Christopher will be able to carry out the role in the distinguished fashion that he is accustomed to. I know that he is also mindful of his roots as a working-class unionist who is pleased to be able to take up this position in the Assembly.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the debate as there are no other Members indicating that they wish to speak. I remind the Assembly that cross-community support is required.

*Question put, That Mr Christopher Stalford be Principal Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.*

*The Assembly divided.*

**Mr Speaker:** OK, Members. I apologise: we are still having technical difficulties with the IT system, so we will defer the result of the Vote until later in the business this morning.

## Ministerial Statements

### School Enhancement Programme

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** While we wait with bated breath for the result of the very close contest that we have just taken part in, I would like to make a statement updating the Assembly on my capital investment plans under the second call to the school enhancement programme, also known as "SEP2".

By way of background, the school enhancement programme was first announced in June 2012. The programme makes funding of between £500,000 and £4 million available for projects aimed at refurbishing or extending existing school provision. Particularly for Members who may be unfamiliar with the project, I make it clear that that is not a new school build; it is refurbishing or extending existing school provision. The first call to SEP was launched in January 2013 and resulted in projects in 50 schools being announced to advance in planning. Forty-seven of those projects are either now complete or close to completion, with two currently on site. One project is on hold, pending a decision on a major works project funded under the Fresh Start Agreement for shared and integrated education.

Given the success of SEP1, on 25 January 2017, I made a written statement to the Assembly on my proposal to make a second call for applications under the programme. By the closing date of 28 February 2017, a total of 165 applications had been received under the call. Those applications were then assessed under the agreed protocol, and separate priority lists were created for primary, post-primary and special schools. To ensure that a pipeline of SEP projects was maintained in the absence of Ministers, the Department's permanent secretary made an announcement in May 2018 of 25 projects from the prioritised lists to advance in planning. Those projects have an estimated investment of £60 million. A further 16 schools, with an enhanced investment of £40 million, were announced by the permanent secretary in January 2019.

#### 11.30 am

Today, I am pleased to announce a further 18 schools that will advance in planning under the school enhancement programme. Twelve are primary schools; five are post-primary schools; and there is one special school that will benefit

from an estimated capital investment of about £45 million. The 12 primary schools to advance in planning are as follows: Botanic Primary School in Belfast; Carrick Primary School in Lurgan; Cliftonville Controlled Integrated Primary School in Belfast; Glencraig Controlled Integrated Primary School, close to Holywood; Holy Child Primary School in Londonderry; Irvinestown Primary School; Kilcooley Primary School; Killinchy Primary School; St John the Baptist Primary School in Belfast; St Kieran's Primary School, Dunmurry; St Paul's Primary School in Mica Drive, Belfast; and Strabane Primary School. The five post-primary schools are Glasry College, Ballyhalbert; St Louis Grammar School, Ballymena; St Patrick's College, Maghera; Sullivan Upper School, Holywood; and Victoria College, Belfast. The eighteenth school that will receive investment is Riverside special school, which is in Antrim.

This is a significant investment that will deliver much-needed capital investment in the schools estate via the school enhancement programme. Improving the schools estate is a priority for me, and the SEP has been an excellent way of delivering capital works projects that have an immediate, positive impact on the schools and pupils. Today's announcement is not just good news for the schools themselves but represents a welcome boost to the economy, especially the construction industry.

In addition to this SEP announcement, I continue to advance the programme of major capital builds, as well as a programme of much-needed minor works across the estate. I will also look to invest in maintenance works across all schools to ensure schools are fit for purpose and enable effective teaching and learning for the benefit of all our children and young people.

**Mr Lyttle:** It is a privilege to serve as Chairperson of the Education Committee. I look forward to working with Committee colleagues and the Minister to ensure we deliver better education for all in our community.

There are obviously many serious challenges facing education to which we must respond decisively. Capital investment is urgently needed by many schools in Northern Ireland, and, whilst the announcement is welcome news for a small number of schools, radical investment and reform is needed to ensure that all our school facilities are fit for purpose. How and when will the Minister establish the root-and-branch independent review of education envisaged by the new deal proposals in order to deliver a reformed, integrated and sustainably resourced education system for all?

**Mr Weir:** First of all, I congratulate the Member on his appointment as Chair of the Education Committee. I know, from the previous mandate when he worked as vice Chair, of his particular passion and involvement in and knowledge of education. I look forward to working with him, the vice Chair and, indeed, all the members of the Education Committee when they are appointed. He is right that the announcement today, even on the capital side, is one piece of the jigsaw. It is important to say that, as we move ahead, there will be a mixture of announcements — some dealing with minor works; some potentially with other SEP announcements — and major capital works. It is important that, as we move ahead, that is part of an overall coordinated position on and picture of how we will deliver, in particular, the school estate in terms of education.

He mentioned the need for reform, and I concur with him. It is undoubtedly the case that, while, for any incoming Minister, there are major resource challenges out there, there is also a strong need to ensure that we get the best possible delivery for all our children. It is also an issue of transformation and reform, and I think that anyone believing that it is simply one or the other —. I am committed to the new document in terms of the delivery of the project of how we globally, if you like, reform education, and I hope to bring proposals soon to the Assembly in connection with that.

**Mr Stalford:** I am grateful to the Minister for his statement and the additional investment that will go into schools in my constituency, particularly Botanic Primary School and Victoria College.

It is the ambition of us all, or at least it should be, that we have a school estate that is fit for the education of our children.

On the theme of all politics being local, I ask the Minister to indicate that he is prepared to visit Nettlefield Primary School off the Woodstock Road to see for himself the need for capital investment in order to improve its facilities.

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for his comments. I do not have great foresight, but I suspect, particularly when we are dealing with a school enhancement programme and, indeed, capital build for schools, that there may be a theme running through a number of the questions that contains a certain level of local interest. It is good that MLAs have that local interest. I will consider and try to accommodate as many invitations as possible. I do not want to give a specific commitment to an individual invitation,

but I will certainly be trying to get out and about as much as possible, because I think it is important that any Minister, particularly an Education Minister, does so.

Across the system, there is a need for capital investment. We need to ensure that no child who goes through the gates of a school is disadvantaged because of the school's physical fabric or its lack of facilities. That means that, with any investment programme, any money has to be made available in a robust and impartial way. As part of that, I am willing and more than happy to visit a range of schools across Northern Ireland.

**Ms Mullan:** First, I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. I look forward to working alongside him and other members of the Committee on progressing the work that we have been doing all along.

I welcome today's announcement of much-needed capital investment, particularly for Holy Child Primary School in Creggan in Derry, a school in my constituency that is over 60 years old and in much need of improved accommodation.

Given the crisis in the education budget, is it the Minister's intention to advance the programme of major capital builds and other works across the school estate?

**Mr Weir:** First, I congratulate the Member on her appointment to vice Chair. I know the work that she has put in over the past few years as the Sinn Féin spokesperson on education, and I look forward to her continuing that work through the formal structures of the Committee.

Yes, it is undoubtedly the case that this is part of a wider picture and a wider jigsaw of need for capital investment. The Member refers to the financial pressures in education. That is undoubtedly the case, and we will be working with Executive colleagues on a range of financial pressures that needs to be dealt with.

There is a little bit more positive news on the capital side. We will be looking to advance major capital works as well. It is important that there be a flow of works that can lead to a level of improvement. I am sure that various Members will have particular schools in mind from their own constituency, but it is undoubtedly always the case that, although a considerable amount will be spent on school improvement through a range of projects, if more money is available, more money can be spent. To that extent, we are also trying to deal with a certain backlog of maintenance work, as

well as a need to try to provide the best possible facilities for all our pupils.

**Mr McGrath:** I congratulate Minister Weir on his appointment. It will provide a certain amount of continuity, and I look forward to discussing important issues, such as special educational needs and youth services, in the period ahead.

In the context of today's announcement, there is sometimes a bit of concern that the time between the announcement and the shovel going into the ground can be too long. Can the Minister give us some assurances about the work that he will undertake to ensure that these projects are delivered in a timely manner?

**Mr Weir:** The Member has become the Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office. I hope that TEO's gain does not become Education's loss. Although it is obviously not my place to appoint members to the Education Committee, I value the experience that the Member brought to the issues as the SDLP education spokesperson.

The school enhancement programme is now a well-trialled and well-worked scheme. It can be the case with any capital build, whether schools, hospitals or a range of other things, that, if you are looking at a major capital programme involving new works, there can be a very long delay between announcement and completion. The one advantage of the school enhancement programme is that it is on a scale of between half a million pounds and £4 million, and it is, effectively, work on-site. One of the processes with new capital build is going through a site search to make sure that you are getting best value for public money and, indeed, finding the most appropriate place. These works will, essentially, be on-site and, therefore, the time between announcement and completion will be shorter than for a major capital announcement.

I mentioned that 47 of 50 in the initial tranche are more or less complete. For all of us, I am sure that there is always a frustration about how quickly these things are turned around. Certainly, we will make sure that this happens as soon as is practicable for each of those schools.

**Mrs Barton:** Mr Weir, I also congratulate you on your appointment as Minister of Education.

I welcome this school enhancement programme, which adds 18 extra schools to the list, and the capital investment of £45 million in them. Particularly, I am pleased to see

Irvinestown Primary School in Fermanagh/South Tyrone on the list. That should give it a boost. However, can the Minister confirm that the money is available immediately and ring-fenced for this purpose?

**Mr Weir:** Do not forget the expenditure. First, without this sounding a little like a love-in of former education spokespersons — I think you are the fourth party education spokesperson to speak — I look forward to working with you.

The money is available, and because it is a capital build, there is a flow of projects. The Department is confident that the money is there. Most of it will not be spent immediately. Probably, it will not occur within this financial year. Unless there is some radical change of direction from the Executive to suddenly cut all programmes, there is confidence that that money is there. It is not dependent upon additional resources from, for example, the British Government, and there is a long tradition on a number of calls with SEPs, so people can take that the announcement means that works at these 18 schools will happen.

**Miss McIlveen:** From the outset, I would like to declare that I am a governor of Killinchy Primary school, and I have met the EA on a number of important issues in relation to it. I am delighted that Killinchy Primary School and Glastry College will benefit from the Minister's announcement.

Is the Minister in a position to give details of the anticipated work to be carried out, the amount of money to be allocated and the likely delivery timescales for both schools?

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member. I know she has been very proactive in pressing the case for Killinchy Primary in particular.

I will highlight a couple of things. First, the money available in each case will be up to £4 million. It is probably likely to be in the region of £3 million to £4 million each. On the detail of what will happen, it is important, because I suspect that this will be raised by a number of Members, to say that the next steps in the process will be that work will go on between the Department and the individual schools to work up the project. All 18 schools have been approved, and all will receive their SEP. The specific detail of what schools get might alter as a result of those discussions. On some occasions in the past, that has been additionally positive. Sometimes, it can be the substitution of what is being provided: it might be found, for example, that a school's actual priority is

ensuring that it has safe wiring or something of that nature. It can also be the case that, if it is then found that, within the envelope of money available, the project can be delivered at a lower rate, some additional money could be available.

#### 11.45 am

On the specifics of the two bits, the remarks I made about what is proposed reflect a school's ask and not necessarily what the end result will be. Glastry College, I think, has highlighted an issue of additional accommodation to bring it up to the schedule of accommodation — for example, a number of units in the school are undersized, and there is a lack of a sports hall. That will form part of the discussions, particularly as regards Glastry. For Killinchy, again, there are accommodation issues and size issues, and I know that there has been a particular issue around traffic management, which, I think, will be a priority as well. Those issues reflect the asks of the school, and there will then be an iteration of discussion around those projects with the individual schools. That is an important caveat to make clear to people. In fact, however, it will mean that all these schools will receive a school enhancement programme.

**Ms Dolan:** I thank the Minister for his statement, and, in particular, I welcome his inclusion of Irvinestown Primary School in the school enhancement project. Will he ensure that the next stage is delivered as soon as possible?

**Mr Weir:** There will be no delay in relation to that. It is fair to say that good work has always been done by the Department on the SEP. I appreciate that former Minister O'Dowd originally announced it. As part of that, there has been a good working relationship between schools, contractors and the Department in helping to deliver the programme. Certainly, there will be no undue delays.

As I said, because of some of the restrictions that do not apply to the school enhancement programme, as opposed to a much larger capital build, which might involve a £20 million or £30 million project, schools are not simply refurbished or provided with new classrooms overnight, but, in terms of timescales, it is a lot better than other capital projects. Certainly, there will not be any level of delay.

**Mr Dunne:** I, too, congratulate Minister Weir on his re-election. I am delighted that he has included three schools in the North Down area,

and I congratulate him on remembering his roots and where he came from. No doubt, it probably did not influence his decision.

Will the Minister indicate how we justify the school enhancement programme against a new build for specific buildings? Is the public getting value for money, or is this just a short-term exercise that puts off the dreaded day when we need new buildings in a lot of areas rather than just a short-term fix?

**Mr Weir:** It is a cocktail of capital projects. It is important that, in terms of the capital money that is available, we ensure that there is a steady spend of that money to deliver for people. As such, it does, I believe, deliver value for money. If we were in a situation where, for example, school enhancement programmes were simply in place of there ever being any major capital builds, that would be the wrong approach. Similarly, if we simply concentrated on new capital builds, we would have a limited number of projects, and this is an opportunity to deliver that.

It is also the case, I am sure, that even some of the schools that applied would, in an ideal world, like an entirely new capital build. It is also the case that, on a case-by-case basis, not all schools will require a new capital build. Sometimes, it is also the case that it is less about the fabric of the existing building but may well be a lack of particular facilities. It may mean that, while the school building itself is very good, there may be a lack of a sports hall or, while provision of subject matters in, say, English and history may be fine, the science lab may need to be looked at.

**Miss Sheerin:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Comhghairdeas leat i do ról nua. Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I congratulate you on your new role. I also want to thank the Minister and congratulate him on his new role.

Like others around the Chamber, I welcome the statement, particularly in relation to St Pat's College in Maghera, which is in my constituency of Mid Ulster. My party has met Mrs Mussen and the team there on several occasions, and I can attest to the urgent need for that capital investment. On her behalf, I ask the Minister if he could provide an indication of the timescale for the project and when work is likely to begin.

**Mr Weir:** On that project, first of all, I seem to remember that, in my previous post, I had the opportunity to visit St Pat's, although there are that many schools that I have either visited or

not visited — I am sure that former Ministers can also refer to this — that I am trying to work out whether there is a slight false memory about that.

Across the board, I cannot give specific commitments on individual timescales, but the intention is that the work will begin in 2022-23. The general rule of thumb for the school enhancement programme is that it would be about an 18-month project, so the idea is that they could be completed within that period. Whereas, with major capital builds, even when they are announced, it is sometimes five or even close to 10 years before there is completion, with these there can be much greater turnaround. We aim to have these completed in 2024-25, so we are still talking about a few years away. The timescale will be on a moving scale, but we hope to get them progressed as quickly as possible.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I join others in congratulating Minister Weir on his appointment as Education Minister. I welcome the inclusion of Carrick Primary School, which is in my constituency. The Minister may know that, whilst it is not a fully formally integrated school, it has a school population that broadly reflects the wider community in which it is geographically placed, and that is very welcome.

Minister, in your statement, you refer to investment in maintenance works, both capital and minor: have you, even at this early stage, any sense of how much that might be? Would you give any thought to looking at the process by which school principals can requisition some minor works, which does seem to be unduly cumbersome, bureaucratic and costly?

**Mr Weir:** Broadly speaking, the overall capital investment will be, as I said, a mix of new build, maintenance and SEP. There is still some thought and decisions to be taken about the precise nature of that mix.

The Member makes a good point about issues around autonomy, particularly in procurement. That is one of the areas that we will want to look at, to ensure that there is always a balance between trying to get the maximum value for public money and, by the same token, ensuring that we do not micromanage. I think that there is a strong case. It is also the case, looking ahead on that issue, that it is about giving people opportunities for levels of autonomy. Previously, when I was Minister, we put out a fairly open questionnaire to schools on the issue of autonomy. Even from schools in very similar positions, there is sometimes a very mixed opinion. Some schools take the view that

they do not want any additional burden, and they effectively want somebody else to sort it out for them, whereas other schools are much keener to embrace it. It is about trying to work out a system whereby we can give, within the context of, as I said, value for money, that level of opportunity for autonomy in a sensible way. That clearly involves levels of procurement and maintenance.

**Mr Beggs:** I, too, congratulate the Minister on his appointment and wish him well.

There are huge pressures on school budgets. That is particularly the case where there have been school amalgamations and schools continue to operate on multiple sites. In the Minister's statement, he indicated that some 59 schools, over a three-year period, had benefited from £145 million. Will the Minister advise how that, along with the new build programme, prioritises and encourages school amalgamations, which can bring about improvements to educational outcomes for our children and young people as well as savings for the Department? At the same time, Minister, can you give an update on the progress in the redevelopment of Islandmagee Primary School, which has already taken over a decade?

**Mr Weir:** First, on the last point, obviously, I do not have direct details here in connection with Islandmagee, but I will be happy to write to the Member on that. I do not know whether he was briefly excited when he saw the announcement because there is reference to "Carrick Primary School"; of course, that is the one in Lurgan, not in the Member's constituency.

The Member makes a good point about the broader rationalisation of the school estate and, indeed, where we have, for instance, mergers, and we will look at that in connection with the transformation side of it. Often, a merger can lead to a better longer-term solution, but Members will also be aware that, often, particularly where there is a split site, mergers can create a lot of upfront costs, so we need to look from a transformation point of view, particularly, in connection with that.

With regard to it playing a role within the decision-making process, mention was made of the fact that these were decided on the existing protocol. A range of priorities are built into that protocol. Amongst those will be the enhancement works that are essential to effect rationalisation projects, so it is, if you like, part of a wider area plan. Where there are, for instance, split sites, ensuring that things can actually be brought together can also be part of that. We are looking at where there are unmet

needs and significant substandard accommodation.

What we need to ensure — I think that this has been happening in the Department — is that, as we move ahead in area planning, for instance, particularly on major capital works, we have an alignment and that it is, if you like, in step with the wider position of trying to ensure that we get the best overall layout of schools as part of the overall position.

**Mr Clarke:** Like others, I welcome the Minister to his appointment and welcome his statement. He mentioned the additional 18 schools under the school enhancement programme. Obviously, I welcome the investment in Riverside, which I had the opportunity to visit in June last year. Much investment is required there. I appreciate, Minister, that your statement today was relatively short and that you, possibly, will not have the detail with you, but will you write to me with further detail on what Riverside is to receive? Given that it is a special school, it is in a difficult and cramped location. Will the Minister get us more detail on that?

When I am on my feet, I take the opportunity, as others have done, to be parochial and discuss Crumlin Integrated. I extend an invitation to the Minister to Crumlin. It has come under difficulty from the Education Authority. Currently, over a thousand pupils leave Crumlin daily to go to other schools, but we would like to see the long-term viability of Crumlin sustained.

**Mr Weir:** First, I am happy to correspond with the Member about Riverside. I am happy to try to accommodate other invitations, but I fear that we may have to speak to the people who have the technology to clone Dolly the sheep, because I may need to be in several places at the same time for school visits. However, we will certainly take every offer and try to accommodate as many school visits as possible. I appreciate that a range of schools put in for the school enhancement programme and others did not. There will be opportunities for other schools as part of that.

**Ms Ennis:** I too welcome the announcement today of funding for the schools that have been listed, but it would be remiss of me and it would be conspicuous by its absence, if I failed to mention one school in particular in my South Down constituency: St Louis Grammar School in Kilkeel. It is in dire need of major capital investment. I extend an invitation to the Minister to pay a visit to St Louis to see the situation at the campus.

In his statement, the Minister alludes to the fact that he intends to continue the advancement of major capital builds. When will he announce the next tranche of funding for capital projects so that schools such as St Louis' in Killeel, in lower Mourne, can get their business case in order and avail themselves of the next tranche of funding?

**Mr Weir:** From that point of view, there are a couple of issues there. As I mentioned, I think, possibly 165 schools initially put in, so we have seen tranches happening. First, I think, the current prioritised list is due to expire in May, but I will consider whether there should be a further tranche of SEPs announced by then or whether we should look to a new call as part of that. Mention was also made of major capital works. I hope to make an announcement on the potential prioritisation of projects for major capital works in the coming months.

### 12.00 noon

It is also the case that, because we have these categories — and the way they are subcategorised — there is a ceiling of £4 million on an SEP. Clearly, if there is a major new build that would be above that, it may be that a school may feel that it is not appropriate to put in a bid for that particular bit; they may look simply towards capital. So it is a certain amount of horses for courses on that basis, although there is also the case that the school could put in for a school enhancement programme and apply for major capital works.

All those projects will be assessed, and we hope that, within the coming months, we can actually move on major capital projects. It will be a completely open process where people can apply on that basis.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call the next Member to speak, can I just remind Members that there are quite a number of Members due to speak and requesting to speak, and we will not get through them at this rate. I am just letting Members know that they should try to keep their remarks as brief as they possibly can.

**Ms Armstrong:** I will try to be brief. I thank the Minister very much for telling the public that we actually have money that can be spent on our schools that are in crisis. I welcome him, of course, back into his ministry. I am delighted that a number of schools in our constituency, such as Killinchy and Glastry, are included. Much-needed work needs to be done there.

The Minister talks about the immediate impact, and I know it could take a bit of time for this to happen, but we need to think also towards the long-term delivery of investment. All this needs to be fed into the root-and-branch review of education that we have agreed on in the new deal document. How will the Minister ensure that that is fed through? How many schools that have already applied and have been awarded money — probably under the permanent secretary — are yet to receive funding? Will he, at some stage, publish the funding that each school receives?

**Mr Weir:** Taking each of those in turn: in the wider picture, any examination of reform will have to be of a holistic nature. There is no point in different aspects of that going down a silo route. Consequently, while a lot of this will probably focus on educational structures and resource finances, the capital has got to marry in with that.

On the state of play of the existing schools, it referred to the earlier provision, and I am sure that an update can be provided on each of the individual schools in the earlier tranches. If we can produce that, we will lay it in the Assembly Library.

For the individual amounts, we are still at the stage where, in the detail of that, a certain amount of work will go on, because, again, part of that will be ongoing discussion about the projects with the schools. I am conscious of the fact that, if we said, "Here is a very definitive amount for each school", that may end up giving a false impression. It may underestimate, sometimes, what money there would be. The only thing I will say for absolute certainty is that all school enhancement projects will be between half a million and £4 million. As Members can suggest, the fact that we were talking about a tranche of money of £45 million across 18 schools means it will tend to be on the higher side of that in general. Obviously, as individual details become available and agreed, that will then become transparent between the Department and the schools.

**Dr Archibald:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Like others, I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. I also welcome today's announcement. In relation to an answer to a previous question about new tranches of funding for capital programmes: schools in need of major capital investment might be inclined, and understandably so, to apply under the schools enhancement programme. Would that have any impact on an application for major capital works?

**Mr Weir:** In that situation, no school is barred from applying for both. Indeed, even if there is a school enhancement programme, it does not automatically rule them out. Obviously, in broader capital works, there are a range of factors that are built in to any protocol, one of which is the physical state of the buildings and the facilities that are there. So, I suppose, to some extent, there is always some impact because it may mean that a scoring mechanism, for instance, on the physical state of any — I am just checking that that is correct. Maybe not. Just give me a moment here. There will be a — Sorry.

There is, ultimately, a situation that, if a school has been approved for an SEP, it is likely to lead to a period of time in which it would not be eligible. The normal rule of thumb is that there is a seven-year period for that, and, again, in the wider context, people will look at it. As I said, that is not to say that schools cannot apply for both, but clearly, if they are successful, there will be a certain times when schools have to take a little bit of a strategic decision themselves about what they feel to be best. Sometimes that will be obvious, because a school may not be necessarily looking for a complete new build. It may say, "Well, actually, we need additional classrooms", because one of the other drawbacks for a school — sometimes this can be an advantage — if it is looking for a complete capital build is that there will be a site search, so it may not necessarily end up where it is at present. The SEPs give an assurance that the work can carry on and, indeed, that the school will remain at its current location, which also gives some certainty for the way ahead.

**Mr Catney:** Minister, like everyone else here, I wish you the best of luck in your portfolio as the Education Minister and every success in that going forward.

I thank the officials that have met with me over the one school that was here today, St John the Baptist. It borders on my constituency, but I was asked by parents to meet the board of governors and the school. I am delighted that this is now being put forward as a school enhancement project. Little St John the Baptist has had half its school closed. Minister, I do not want to infringe on your time, but, if at all possible, you will see what that will do and how it will transform that whole area. With that school being closed down, the vandalism and the children trying to go there, in the enveloping of that school, can you and your officials try to keep to a minimum the length of time and the disruption?

**Mr Weir:** First of all, I pay tribute to the Member. I know he has been particularly assiduous in raising the case of St John the Baptist, and I credit him with doing a lot of work with the school. I also highlight, given the appointment of the new principal of St John the Baptist, that we have not given this just to get a favourable response from a social media commentator. I hope, like the original St John the Baptist, this is a forerunner of better things.

I am sure the Member will be assiduous in ensuring that the envelope is pushed out as much as possible in connection with this. Again, the aim is to try to deliver these as quickly as we possibly can. On that basis, there will be no undue delay, but, obviously, we want to have, from the Department's point of view, a clear discussion with the school on the exact details of what will be provided.

**Ms Flynn:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, and I also send my congratulations to Mr Weir on his appointment as Minister of Education. I welcome the statement from the Minister today, particularly in relation to the investment that is coming into St Kieran's and St John the Baptist schools in West Belfast. I also thank the Speaker, as I know he was involved in some of that work with St John the Baptist School locally. Can the Minister please outline when the work on these two schools will commence?

**Mr Weir:** As indicated, we have an overall timescale. We do not have the detail, because some of that will involve the wider discussions. We are hoping that, with the school enhancement programme, people will be on-site in '22-'23 and that, indeed, there will be the normal timescale, which is roughly about 18 months. There can be a fairly quick turnaround with SEP construction. One of the advantages is that — this again depends on the exact nature of the work that is being done — in the vast majority of cases, it should mean that there will not be any particular levels of dislocation. I cannot give a guarantee of that for every school. There may need to be some temporary relocation, but the fact that it is on-site and will be part of the school should mean that we can minimise the level of disruption for any of the schools. Again, I look forward to new facilities both at St John's and St Kieran's.

I look forward to the refreshing sound of Members welcoming the inclusion of a school that is outside their constituency. Pat Catney, to be fair to him, a Member for Lagan Valley, did break the taboo and welcomed the inclusion of a school in West Belfast, so he should perhaps get a special Speaker's prize. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Speaker:** I will consider that in due course.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I join the chorus of congratulations to Mr Weir on his reappointment as Minister. He has given some detail of the plan for Glastry College, the likely timescales, and the correlation between receiving school enhancement programme money and being granted money for a new build. On that basis, is Glastry College still in line for a new build? I declare an interest as chair of the board of Movilla High School. Does the announcement have any implications for area planning in Ards and North Down?

**Mr Weir:** First, I have highlighted the timescale. I am not making any particular assumptions about the two schools that have been mentioned. What I have highlighted about the details of the project is based on what the school put in its application and what the asks were. In most cases, that will then be reflected precisely in the school enhancement programme, based as it is on the school's needs. As has been mentioned, in the normal process of the school enhancement programme, there may be a bar on a successful application for a new build, but we will want to look at everything in the wider context of area planning.

Similarly, the wider context of area planning will need to be looked at for Movilla High School. We will come back to that at a later stage. If a development proposal comes forward, there will need to be reassessment to ensure that it is fit for purpose. Sometimes, as I said, what a school says it wants may not necessarily be the absolute priority when it comes to what it needs. Sometimes, when a project is under way, it can even be found that priorities change a little bit.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I, too, congratulate the Minister of Education. I congratulate him on the investment in Cliftonville Integrated Primary School in North Belfast. It is very much welcomed.

The Minister mentioned procurement earlier in his answer to, I think, Dolores Kelly. I would like procurement procedures to be strengthened so that it is not the case that, if schools go down the CPD route, more money is spent doing minor works and replacing fixtures than would be if that work had been done independently. Significant money is being invested, so I ask the Minister, along with CPD, SIB and others, to bring forward enhanced procedures. That money is welcome. However, procurement certainly needs to be tightened up and to be

more cost-effective and inclusive of social clauses and social benefits.

**Mr Weir:** I take the point that the Member makes. The wider issue of procurement lies largely outside my Department's remit. CPD largely sits in the Department of Finance. We have to be careful that we do not talk at cross purposes. For any major procurement, there have to be clear-cut regulations and procedures. Where there can be a level of annoyance and where we need to look at this from the schools' point of view is where something they see as being a very minor issue has, at times, a long lead-in time, potentially creating a situation in which relatively minor work seems to cost a large amount of money. It is about getting that balance at the lower level. If we are looking at major areas of procurement, it should be universal throughout government to try to ensure a level playing field.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I echo the congratulations to Mr Weir on his appointment. I also congratulate my colleague Chris Lyttle, who has taken over as Chair of the Committee for Education.

I was delighted to see Botanic Primary School and Victoria College included on the list. I am very conscious that Victoria College is one of a large number of post-primary schools in my constituency that has the capacity, if given additional funding for such works, to take on more pupils.

In the last academic year, 200 pupils were not allocated their first choice, and, at the end of the day, seven were not allocated a place at all.

You mentioned the protocol and its principal criteria for amalgamation and split sites: I just wonder whether you are minded to change the protocol to reflect where there are pressures, such as I have outlined, to allow for more pupils to be taken on.

**12.15 pm**

**Mr Weir:** As regards the protocol mentioned, in terms of split sites, the fact that Victoria College operates on a split site was one of the factors that was a determinant in reaching that decision. If it helps to create, if you like, a more sustainable school estate, that is preferable.

As we look at the broader area of school numbers, we need to ensure that we get the right processes there, particularly for development proposals. The Member may appreciate that I cannot comment on an individual case, but, more generally, we have to

ensure that the development proposals are fit for purpose, and, sometimes, that means that we look at things to see where there can be some easier wins. In some cases, there has been a converse situation — I know that the Department has been proactive on this — where schools have an artificial enrolment number that does not reflect the real situation. It was maybe a decision taken in the 70s or 80s. So, there has been an accommodation through downsizing. Clearly, with any individual proposal, we will look at the overall system. That has to feed in, and it will also be part of the wider review. How we manage that and the processes will play into area planning.

Obviously, I am under a legal duty to determine each individual application on its merits, so I will not comment on the individual case, and I assume that the Member will not expect me to anyway.

**Mr McCrossan:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome you to your new role, and I welcome the Minister back into his role. First, Minister, may I thank you for a job that you did three years ago, just prior to the collapse of the institutions, at Cloughcor school? You kindly accepted my request to visit. Those works have taken place, so I would like to put on record my thanks to you. I also put on record my appreciation to Derek Baker, who has done a tremendous job in a very challenging situation over the last few years in the Department of Education.

Many points have been made about moneys awarded to schools. Mine is focused on a former school of mine: Strabane Primary School. I attended it 20 short years ago, and, since then, it has not changed very much. It was in line for a new school, and I know that there was hope that that would be the case. Will that still be the case, dependent on the level of funding given to the school, or will this simply replace that original proposal?

Also, just before I finish, a former principal of Strabane Primary School retired this year. Mr David Canning gave 38 years of his life to the children in Strabane, and he was principal of that school for 26 years, so I put on record my appreciation to him as well.

**Mr Weir:** I echo a couple of points that the Member has made. First, it is right that we pay tribute to some of our retiring teachers and principals, many of whom have spent, perhaps, decades at particular schools and seen generations of children go through them. Without getting into any recriminations about the last three years, it would remiss of me not to

say that, despite the limitations that have been placed on officials, a lot of good work has been put in by officials in all Departments to ensure that as much progress is made as possible.

I, too, remember the visit to West Tyrone. It was a bit of a Storm Brendan-type situation. I remember we almost had to borrow the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party's submarine to get back that day, so heavy was the rain on that occasion.

As indicated, if there has been a successful SEP, the general rule is that it will prevent a complete new build for a period; however, there can be the opportunity to obtain that via the other route. Obviously, in Strabane's case, a lot of the focus will be on issues around new classrooms and, indeed, the extension of that. Hopefully, I will be back in the Member's constituency visiting schools in drier circumstances.

**Mr Lynch:** I welcome the Minister's statement and wish him well in the post. I am somewhat disappointed that there are no Gaelscoileanna on the list. It may be that none applied. I understand that there will be other opportunities for schools to apply, and I hope that the Minister will be inclusive of all sectors, including the Irish language sector.

**Mr Weir:** From that point of view, I do not know. All indications were, I think, that 165 schools applied. As others can bear out, it is undoubtedly the case that, if you were to visit schools around the country, you would find that a lot more schools would feel that they would benefit from either a new build or an SEP. In some cases, the decision will have been taken by the school as to which route they see as the more appropriate. The criteria are entirely objective, and schools are scored around those criteria and then, if you like, ranked according to the list. The only subdivision is not between any form of sectors but to getting a mix of primary and post-primary and having some indication of special needs schools. Quite frankly, irrespective of the sector that any school applies from, they are scored entirely by officials and entirely on the basis of those objective criteria. That will continue to be the case.

**Mr McGuigan:** I congratulate you on your appointment as Minister of Education. I alert you to the fact that I have sent you an email requesting an urgent meeting about the proposed closure of Barnish Primary School in my constituency, and I hope that you look on that request favourably.

I welcome your statement and the investment of £45 million in our schools estate. In particular, I welcome the investment in St Louis Grammar School in Ballymena in my constituency. I was checking over and saw that I had had a meeting with the permanent secretary and departmental officials at the beginning of 2018 about the much-needed work at St Louis'. The school is in much need of a new canteen and outdoor sports facilities and repairs to windows and doors throughout the school. Will the Minister confirm that this is the work that will be allocated to St Louis'? Will he confirm when the school will get the full allocation of the money given to it?

**Mr Weir:** As indicated, as with all the proposals, there is an overall timescale for the SEP, so I cannot go into details on an individual school. That will slightly vary, depending on the discussions. The requests were highlighted in a similar manner to how the Member asked about them: the canteen, some replacements of windows, security and sports facilities. Those are the requests, and we will work with them on that. I appreciate the work that the Member has done, and I am slightly reminded of the phrase, "Victory has a thousand parents, and defeat is an orphan". A lot of good work has been put in by a range of Members across the spectrum.

Specifically on the potential school closure mentioned by the Member, I will take advice, as I do not know what stage that is at. The Member will appreciate that, legally, there are periods where a Minister, with a development proposal, can meet to listen to submissions and hear advice. Because the Minister — in the absence of a Minister, the Department — will take a final decision, they cannot particularly comment on that. There will also be a period in which the Minister is prevented from having that meeting, so I will need to look at that individual case, depending on where it is in the process.

**Mr McCann:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I congratulate you on your elevation to the post of Speaker. I also congratulate the Minister on his reappointment to the post, and I look forward to a meeting at the earliest possible convenience to discuss some concerns that I have.

The statement is welcome, especially where it mentions St Paul's Primary School in Mica Drive. In its own way, it is a unique school, with over 25% of the pupils coming from the rich cultural and ethnic backgrounds that exist in the area. That enhances everybody's education in the area. I know that the Minister is being pressed to give timelines and dates, but is it possible that he could ask someone in the

Department to correspond with me on a timeline for work to begin on that school?

**Mr Weir:** Obviously, we will respond, and I thank the Member for his question. He will know about the constraints of finance as a former member of the old Finance Committee. In terms of the initial level of correspondence, the direct contact will be between the Department and the schools. I think that there is a need to keep the wider community involved with that. I had the opportunity, I remember, to visit St Paul's. It is, as the Member said, a particularly significant mix of people, which, I think, works very well in the school. As part of that, we want to make sure that the scheme at St Paul's and others can progress as soon as possible. Obviously, we will be able to respond to any correspondence that the Member gives us.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. First of all, I congratulate the Minister on his appointment to the Department. I have no doubt that he will perform his duties as assiduously as before.

I have been in regular contact with St Patrick's College, Maghera. I have had visits, and I commend the Minister's officials, who took the time to meet the school principal, the chair of the board of governors and Councillor Martin Kearney on site to see the actualities of the school, so please convey that thanks to the officials for their time and commitment, Minister. We have heard some degree of detail around the commencement date, but — perhaps you would wish to write to me about this, Minister — could you provide me with details of the works that have now been approved for it and the level of financial commitment to those works as well, please?

**Mr Weir:** I am certainly happy to correspond with the Member. As indicated earlier, this is, if you like, stage 1; it is the approval bit. The next stage is the scoping out of the project between the Department and the school. Even once work starts, there can be a degree of variation. Once that project work has been done in terms of that scoping exercise, we will be in a better position to provide a little more meat on the bone about directly what will be done and what it is likely to cost. I seem to remember visiting St Patrick's College, possibly with the Member, previously. In part, that was an opportunity to see the state of the buildings, and it is good, therefore, that we are seeing, in terms of some of the provisions, a good news story as regards St Pat's.

**Miss Woods:** I extend my welcome to the announcement today by the Minister, and I welcome him back to the post. I am certainly glad to see that three schools in the north Down area are to be included in the scheme, as well as across the board. As Members have said, we have much to do to address the education issues that we face here. I certainly hope to work alongside the Minister, especially to address the backlog of minor works that are much needed across the estate and, as the Minister will know, have continued to pile up. Will the proposed advancement of minor works address the current backlog of projects first, and how much will be made available through that?

**Mr Weir:** I welcome the Member. I think that I am right in saying that she is a former pupil of Sullivan Upper, so I suppose that she will be particularly delighted to see her old school getting this advantage.

Some of the minor works will depend on what budget is available. There is also a decision to be taken because, to some extent, there are three areas — the school enhancement programme, the major capital build and minor works — and a wee bit of thought to be given to what the right concoction of the three is. It is undoubtedly the case, in terms of overall capital works, including minor works, that, while it is very welcome to see actions being taken and while the budget may be less pressed than the resource budget, it could be spent two or three times over, at least. Certainly, we will try to ensure that there is the right mix of all those elements.

**Mr Allister:** I express my disappointment at the neglect of the controlled sector in north Antrim. Indeed, in the entirety of County Antrim, it seems that no controlled school has been found worthy of the improvements. What a contrast with County Down and the Minister's constituency, past and present, where four such schools are to be advanced.

Is there a particular reason why County Antrim is being ignored? *[Interruption.]* Since there have been 165 applicants and there are still over 100 schools waiting, will the Minister publish the list of those that are still waiting for inclusion in the scheme?

**12.30 pm**

Finally, I join with Mrs Kelly in urging upon the Minister speedy action to restore autonomy to individual schools on minor works. It is preposterous that, when you have a broken

window or door, you cannot simply get it fixed as you could before, and the expense to the public purse is escalating.

**Mr Weir:** It would, perhaps, be surprising if the Member was not expressing some level of disappointment at whatever was being said. It may have escaped the Member's notice that, for instance, Riverside Special School in Antrim is in County Antrim.

**Mr Allister:** The controlled sector, I said.

**Mr Weir:** A friend of mine has an expression: "Every day is a school day". It may surprise the Member to realise that it is also a controlled school. As part of the overall picture, 10 out of the 18 schools are from the controlled sector, and, indeed, without getting into a geography lesson, the boundaries of County Antrim mean that some of those schools that are in Belfast fall within County Antrim.

The schools were selected based on rigorous, objective criteria that were applied by officials. I did not seek in any way to interfere with those or adjust the list in any shape or form, because I think it is important that those criteria are there, fair and objectively. It will mean that, within any tranche, some schools will be successful and others will not.

I will consult with officials on the publication of any list. It may well be that that is not the basis on which schools put in an application, but I will contact the Member about what level of discussion there could be. It may well be that, from a geographical point of view, on a particular occasion, one area or another will benefit. That is based on objective criteria, and that is the way it should be.

**Ms Sugden:** Like others, I congratulate the Minister. His appointment is probably the most critical in providing continuity in what will be a worryingly short mandate with the time that we have left.

Generally, I am quite frustrated at how government spends money. More often than not, it feels like we are firefighting by trying to deal with issues as they are presented. We are quite reactionary, when, really, we should be trying to focus on investing to save so that we can try and save some money. Indeed, if the Prime Minister is not forthcoming with the money that we had hoped for, that is something that all Ministers will have to have a keen focus on.

Is the Minister considering the haemorrhaging of resources by many schools? I wish to pick up a point from the earlier questions from Ms Bradshaw and Mr Beggs on the Minister's consideration of split-site schools when he is considering capital investments. I appreciate that there are two different funding pots, but I think that we need to look at that strategically if we are to get somewhere with that issue.

**Mr Weir:** I do not, in any way, disagree with the Member. It is part of the wider picture, and capital investment has to be aligned with the overall position.

As I said, we need to see levels of reform and transformation, and some of that will be within the schools estate. It may mean that, as the Member mentioned, there is a certain level of invest to save through that transformation, and certain moneys may need to be put up front to produce better finances and educational facilities. We should not, however, kid ourselves. If we are looking at transformation of the broader schools estate, sometimes that will mean difficult decisions. While people can buy into a wider picture, perhaps when it gets to their areas, it is human nature that they will be a lot more protective and supportive of those areas.

The Member is right: we need to provide a more strategic vision and something that is more long term in its approach.

## **Resolution of HSC Agenda for Change Staff Dispute**

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** I am grateful for the opportunity to make a statement to the Assembly on the industrial action in the Health and Social Care (HSC) service and the work that will, hopefully, bring this to an end. As this has been a fast-moving situation, I apologise to the Assembly for not providing the usual advance sight of this statement.

As this is my first time addressing the House as Minister, I want to take the opportunity to reassure the Assembly, Health and Social Care staff and members of the public that I absolutely recognise the challenges that our health service faces. Too many patients have been waiting for far too long, and our staff, on which the health service is totally dependent, have become increasingly frustrated and demoralised. It is as a result of those daunting and unprecedented challenges that I stand in front of you as Minister. There is no issue more important than the health and well-being of our people, and I hope that, by picking this Department, we were

able to demonstrate our absolute commitment to tackling and resolving the difficulties that our health service is facing.

Of course, whilst the problems are well known, we must not forget that, each and every day, our health service continues to perform extraordinary work in often incredibly difficult circumstances. That is why I especially wish to pay tribute to all our Health and Social Care workers. There are over 70,000 people employed by the HSC and a similar number working in the independent sector. Their work is vital, and I wish to thank each and every one of them for the talent, effort and dedication they bring 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

The circumstances that led to the unprecedented industrial action by HSC staff on Agenda for Change terms and conditions were hugely regrettable, and I fully appreciate the frustrations and the stresses that have led to that point. I know that it will have been an extremely hard decision for many of those to take industrial action, but I understand the reasons why they did.

I will shortly outline the measures that the Executive will take to try and bring the industrial action to an end, but I will begin by explaining the background. Agenda for Change is the national pay system for all NHS and HSC staff, with the exception of doctors, dentists and the more senior executives. It was introduced in 2004. A refresh of Agenda for Change was formally ratified at the NHS staff council in 2018, where it was agreed, in conjunction with trade unions, to implement a three-year pay deal covering the period from 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2021, as well as reform of the pay structure and changes to terms and conditions. In the absence of Ministers, the Department of Health was unable to implement the three-year deal as it was implemented in the other parts of the UK. However, the Department has been engaging with HSC employers and trade unions on an Agenda for Change refresh for Northern Ireland.

At the end of 2018, a pay award, whilst not agreed with the unions, was implemented. It mirrored the first year of the three-year pay deal agreed in England. Basically, it was the same uplift, adding 3% to the pay bill, albeit from a starting point 1% lower than in England. Despite significant engagement throughout 2019, which included over 20 meetings between the Department, HSC employers and trade unions, no agreement was made with trade unions on the year 2 — 2019-2020 — pay offer. Pay parity, together with safe staffing, are the main causes of the current dispute. Two

formal offers have so far been made for 2019-2020. However, these were both rejected by trade unions as neither of them restored parity with England. Both the pay award for 2018-19, which added 3% to the pay bill, and the most recent offer made for this year, which would have added 3.1% to the pay bill, need to be viewed in the wider context of public-sector pay in Northern Ireland, where pay increases were in the region of 1%.

The developing pay dispute, together with trade union concerns on safe staffing, have caused the four largest Agenda for Change trade unions in Northern Ireland — the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), UNISON, Unite and NIPSA — to commence formal balloting of their members for industrial action, up to and including strike action. Ballots in favour of industrial action were passed by all four unions, and UNISON commenced industrial action in late November, with action short of strike across a number of sites. This industrial action escalated across the region, involving members of all four unions, with a strike on 18 December 2019, a further two days of strike action by the RCN on 8 and 10 January 2020, and strike action by UNISON on 10 January. Importantly, Members should also remain mindful that other Agenda for Change unions are balloting, or shortly intend to ballot, their members.

The industrial action caused the cancellation of thousands of outpatient and elective appointments across Northern Ireland, and trade unions have stated that, without resolution to the dispute, the action will escalate further. Three days of strike action by the RCN are scheduled on 20, 22 and 24 January, with further days scheduled in February and March.

Pay parity has been a consistent theme throughout the industrial action. Over the last number of years, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have each adopted a different approach to pay, resulting in the pay values no longer being identical in each of the four jurisdictions. Scotland's Agenda for Change pay values are higher than those in England, which in turn are higher than those in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's break in pay parity with England occurred in 2015-16 following a decision in January 2015.

Turning to the resolution of the dispute: applying England's pay values to current pay scales in Northern Ireland, with effect from 1 April 2019, will create pay parity with England. That is estimated to cost £109 million. The Department has, through a combination of in-year easements and successful bids for additional funding, been able to assemble £79

million, £50 million of which is non-recurrent funding, to increase pay for this staff grouping for 2019-2020. Therefore, an additional £30 million is required to meet the costs of Agenda for Change pay parity with England in 2019-2020. A move to pay parity will, of course, also have implications for our budget in future years.

It should be noted that a further £67 million of recurrent funding will be necessary in 2020-21 to support national living wage uplifts and if pay recommendations for other staff groups not covered by Agenda for Change, such as family health services, and the doctors' and dentists' review body recommendations are to be met.

A move to parity with England will not inherently address recruitment and retention problems in Northern Ireland. Whilst there are over 7,000 vacancies being recruited for in the HSC, the high number is due to a range of factors, including the outworkings of the transformation agenda and the creation of new staff mixes in HSC; the ever-increasing size of the workforce necessary to attempt to keep pace with the demands of a growing and ageing population; and shortages of suitably qualified staff, which is not a problem unique to Northern Ireland.

I should clarify that the funding of the £30 million cost to move to parity in the current year is to be financed by drawing forward proposed allocations for future years. So, while I am glad that it is not impacting on the funds available for other services this year, it is important to note that it has not been financed by an additional allocation to Northern Ireland.

While pay is a factor in recruitment and retention, a more significant component, as evidenced by the trade union focus on safe staffing, is the pressure on staff across the HSC. Those pressures will be properly addressed only by transforming the HSC and by fully implementing the actions in the Health and Social Care workforce strategy, which was published in 2019. In addition to pay, there is much to do on the refresh of Agenda for Change, and the Department is committed to working with trade unions on that.

Of course, pay parity has been one element of the industrial action, but the Assembly will be aware that safe staffing has also been a very significant issue for unions during this dispute, and I want to provide some assurances today. The workforce strategy aims by 2026 to meet Northern Ireland's Health and Social Care workforce needs. It includes 24 actions under three objectives: achieving the appropriate numbers and skills mix through training, commissioning, good workforce planning,

provision of careers advice and the development of new roles; ensuring that staff feel valued and rewarded and that the HSC is an employer and trainer of choice; and by improving business intelligence.

The strategy, which was produced with trade unions and others, will, if implemented, greatly assist with maintaining safe staffing levels in Northern Ireland. In addition, the Department is developing options to reduce reliance and spending on agencies and locums. Trade unions have, as part of the current dispute, also made a number of requests in respect of their view of what measures are needed to address the safe staffing element of the dispute.

I respect the fact that the trade unions will end the current dispute only if pay parity is achieved and they are convinced that there is a workable plan to achieve safe staffing within a reasonable time frame. I therefore commit today to my officials working urgently with all unions to produce a costed implementation plan for safe staffing within an agreed short period. The trade unions' asks on safe staffing will not be delivered immediately. This will be a long-term endeavour, but I hope that unions and staff will take assurance that the plan will be realistic, that additional funding will be required and that I will bring it to the Executive for endorsement on that basis.

#### 12.45 pm

To sum up, I believe the component parts are now in place to settle the industrial dispute. I presented a paper to Executive colleagues this morning, and I am grateful to my fellow Ministers for endorsing those proposals. Additional funding has now been secured, and pay parity with England can be restored. Our nurses and other great health and social care workers can come off the picket line and get back to the jobs that they love and that they do so well.

As the House would expect, I have not wasted any time following today's Executive meeting. I immediately met trade union officials and briefed them on the latest developments. The new offer was outlined by me to trade union representatives this morning and will be formally submitted to them this afternoon. Officials will meet the trade unions tomorrow to agree on the detail. I am grateful to trade union leaders for the constructive meeting this morning. I appreciate that they have to go through their internal processes, and I sincerely hope and believe that the trade unions will now bring industrial action to a swift end.

To be clear, the new offer will reinstate pay parity with England, and not just for this year. My Department is providing a written commitment that it will be maintained in 2020-21. Decisive action has also been taken on the vital issue of staffing, and my Department is providing a written commitment to immediate high-level engagement with unions to produce a costed implementation plan on safe staffing within an agreed short period.

The breakthrough that we all wanted has been achieved. This is a good day, after some very difficult days. I am grateful to my colleagues around the Executive table for helping to make it happen. We have moved significantly and quickly to take action together. That is a sign of optimism for the future. I know that there is scepticism in many quarters about what this Health Minister and this Executive can do for health and social care services. That is entirely understandable. Many good people doubt whether we can set party politics aside and work together constructively. We shall see, but maybe, just maybe, today will give the sceptics some pause for thought.

We have, of course, so much more to do. This has been a very challenging period for our health and social care services, but the situation was challenging before the industrial action and will continue to be for the foreseeable future. Sustained additional funding is essential, but there are no quick fixes. We can, however, provide hope and assurance to our workforce that the problems that they have been telling us about for so long will be addressed once and for all. The Assembly, the Executive, the Department and the trusts are not just hearing those concerns but listening and acting. If devolution is to work, it has to deliver for our health service, so let us get on with it.

**Mr Gildernew:** Ar dtús, cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire, agus déanaim comhghairdeas leis. I congratulate the Minister on his appointment to this very important Department. I look forward to working with him and the members of the Committee to deliver on the health needs of our people here.

We all recognise that there are many challenges and huge complexity in the Department. The challenges include those around physical and mental health, but they also go across the primary, acute and social care sectors. It will require genuine partnership not only across parties, Departments and health trusts but with staff, service users and their carers. That approach will help to transform and deliver the healthcare that we need.

I ask the Minister, recognising the vital role that staff play, which he has acknowledged, to commit to work closely with trade unions in the time ahead through the strategic health partnership forum and to reconvene the transformation advisory board.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question and welcome him to his new post as Chair of the Health Committee. I look forward to working with him, the rest of the Committee members and Gary Middleton, as your vice Chair. It will be important that we have a good working relationship. That is why I will get my office to extend an invite to you, as the Chair, and the vice Chair to sit down and meet me and my senior official team as soon as possible so that we can ensure that that is going on.

The Member slightly took the lead: when I met the trade unions this morning, I told them that I was reinstating the strategic health partnership forum, of which they will be a vital component. It gives the main leadership team in the trusts and the main trade union officials direct access to my ministerial office and the table where I can make decisions. I have already moved on that, and I will keep the Member abreast. If he wanted to be part of that, I would be more than happy to extend a welcome to him, as Chair of the Health Committee, to sit on the strategic forum.

**Mr Middleton:** I congratulate the Minister on his appointment and, indeed, the Committee Chair on his appointment. I look forward to working with you both in the time ahead. I welcome the Minister's statement, and I join him in paying tribute to the many workers in our health and social care system for all the work they do, given the challenging times that they have had to face over the past three years in particular.

The Minister's statement mentioned that pay parity on its own will not address recruitment and retention. To that end, will he work with his Executive colleagues to ensure that the graduate entry medical school in Londonderry is delivered and that we work to ensure that we address some of the unique challenges that are faced in our trusts?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. I welcome him to his role as vice Chair of the Health Committee and look forward to working with him. I apologise to the Chair and vice Chair for not giving them advance sight of or engagement on the statement, but this morning was very quick-moving.

The Department is working on the Executive proposals for a health school at Magee. It is an Executive priority, and we are looking at it. As the Member is fully aware, we will address where that sits, given the outworkings of the financial commitments that were given last night, but I think there is a financial commitment and an intention of goodwill around the Executive table to make sure that the medical school at Magee proceeds.

**Mr Durkan:** I also congratulate the Minister and wish him well. We look forward to meeting him to address the many challenges that he will face. It is fair to say that the issues of pay parity and safe staffing are possibly the hottest of the hot potatoes that he has inherited, but it is also fair to say that we will all be judged on how those issues are handled and how we ensure fairness for our hard-working and heroic health workers.

The Minister's ability to ensure pay parity and safe staffing will be predicated on money and where more money can be found, although I seem to recall the Secretary of State saying that there would be money to address that issue. If that is the case, I wonder why we are going into next year's budget to get money to address it.

The statement refers to work being done by the Department to reduce the reliance on agencies and the spend on locums. That reliance was created by disastrous decision-making in the past. I wonder whether the Minister is in a position to outline the current spend on agency staff and, at this early stage, indicate how it might be reduced, if not eradicated.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. Workforce planning is key to the success of our National Health Service — that cannot be stressed enough — through the engagements with our unions and the recognition of the hard-working staff whom we relied on so heavily over the past three years while we were not in this place.

The expenditure on agency staff has tripled in the last five years. In the nursing and midwifery group alone, it has quadrupled to £52.1 million. Some 45% of the agency expenditure in 2018-19 was on nursing and midwifery, a 62% increase on the previous year. Other high agency expenditure groups are admin and clerical, which come in at £20.1 million. I suppose the Member's question is predicated on whether the Department should not simply put a stop to agency workers or whether we should look at how the issue is redressed. We have to be realistic: patient safety is paramount,

and any blanket ban on the use of agencies would mean staff shortages and ward closures. We need to be realistic: there will always be a need for some agency workers to supplement full-time staff. The RCN itself has acknowledged that staff employed in the HSC are choosing to register with agencies, some to work additional hours and others to work full-time in the HSC via agency contracts. It is about making sure that we get that balance right. However, my preference is to see more full-time employees in our health service providing the excellent service and delivery that they already provide.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call another Member to speak, I advise the House that more than 20 Members have indicated that they wish to ask a question. I remind you that you are here to ask a question. Thank you very much. It is just to respect the other Members who wish to get in.

**Mr Chambers:** I am delighted to be able to congratulate my colleague Robin Swann on his appointment as Minister of Health. I know that he will conduct his duties with efficiency and, more importantly, with compassion.

When can the staff who reluctantly and with heavy hearts took the decision to stand on picket lines to highlight their pay parity injustice expect to see the money that the Minister secured for them this morning placed into their accounts?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his kind words. I assure the House that they were not scripted by me or any of my departmental staff.

With regard to the expected money and when it can be agreed, as I said, we met trade union officials this morning. When we have the £30 million assured now that allows us to go to pay parity, a lot of detail has to be worked out on how it is actually implemented and at what levels across various pay scales. My departmental officials, whom I thank for the work they have been doing in the absence of a Minister, will meet the trade unions tomorrow. We will get that finalisation as soon as possible, and it is hoped that we can get the money into members' pay packets as soon as possible. At this stage, it will likely be, potentially, April at the latest. That is what we hope to see. That engagement with trade union officials started today and will continue tomorrow, and I gave them the commitment that, if needs be, we will meet them again on Thursday afternoon to finalise things so that we can stave off the industrial action that is already scheduled for next week.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Mr Speaker, I forgot to congratulate you on your appointment when I made my first remarks. I thank the Health Minister, and I wish him well. I look forward to working on the Health Committee and with the other health spokespersons to support you in your role.

In your statement, Minister, you talked about four trade unions. You did not mention the Royal College of Midwives, although you mentioned them briefly in some of your responses. You will know that, on 6 January this year, the college announced that it was going to ballot its members because there is £2,000 less in their pay packets than in the pay packets of midwives in England. How will you engage with them? The vacancies are maybe not as numerous in midwifery, but they are as acutely felt, and there are not as many midwives with agencies and in locum banks. How will you take that forward? Will you commit to giving them information around the new training places and to looking at the now out-of-date maternity strategy?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for her question, and I welcome her to the Health Committee. I know that her voice has been critical on mental health in the past few months while this place was not sitting.

The four unions that I mentioned are those that had balloted and taken industrial action. The midwives were not among those, but they are in the process of balloting members. They were in the meeting this morning, but the difficulty we may have is that their balloting system has already started, so it may be hard for them not to proceed with the ballot for industrial action.

That is why I hope today's announcement is enough to stave off any industrial action from our midwives.

**1.00 pm**

In regards to the reassurances about how I engage with the midwives' union, it is a member of the strategic health partnership forum, which I said we would reinstate and get up and running. They were present with me, this morning, in the meeting, so they are fully briefed and, hopefully, up to date. I am hopeful, and if the Member has any contacts in there and can use anything to make sure that they do not go to the length of industrial action, it would be greatly appreciated.

**Ms P Bradley:** I join other Members in wishing the new Minister of Health every success going

into the future. I like, in his statement, where he mentioned the word "optimism", because I think any Minister of Health needs to have a massive degree of optimism. I also wish the Chair and vice chair all the very best. I will miss my role in Health, but I look forward, as Chair of the Committee for Communities, to working along with Health, because so much of that overlaps.

I am also quite mindful that I was part of Agenda for Change when I worked for the Northern Trust in 2004. It seems like an awfully long time ago. I want to ask the Minister about conversations that he may have been having around issues to do with banding. This may well have been rectified by now, but I know that, specifically, the Ambulance Service raised concerns about the banding under Agenda for Change, and they are still waiting, or they were still waiting, to hear information back on that. The Minister may or may not have that detail, but can he let me how that has proceeded?

**Mr Swann:** I do not have that specific answer for the Member, but I will make sure that my officials get in contact and that we write to the Member. I value the work that she did when she was Chair of the Health Committee. She was a great advocate and voice for that.

I welcome the Member to her role in Communities because, as she said, there is a great overlap, and that is something that I was stressing around the Executive table. The Department of Health has an input to every Department, every home, every house in Northern Ireland, so it is vital that we get that cross-party, cross-Executive support.

The Member talked about having optimism in taking on the role of Health Minister. Other words have been used to describe me taking on this role. "Optimism" was one of the more positive, I can assure you. I will make sure that I write to the Member about pay banding in the Ambulance Service.

**Mr Sheehan:** Comhghairdeas leis an Aire as a cheapachán mar Aire Sláinte. Guím gach deamhén leis san am atá le teacht. Congratulations to the Minister on his appointment. I wish him every success in the time ahead.

The Minister will be aware that the nursing and midwifery task force, which was established by Michelle O'Neill when she was Minister, has recently concluded its report on the workforce. Will the Minister give a commitment to publish that report as a matter of urgency?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his warm words of welcome.

That was not mentioned in the statement, but I am happy to confirm to the Member that it was raised this morning by the RCN and the midwifery council. I have not had sight of that task force report, but I gave a commitment, this morning, that we will publish it as soon as I have had time to review it. I also gave a commitment to the unions, this morning, that I will engage with them before I publish it, so that we are all on the same page on where we are with the health service. So, rather than just rushing to publish it immediately, I am in a conversation with the trade unions and departmental officials to make sure that the task force report is fit for purpose and does the job that we want it to do.

**Mr Buckley:** I welcome the Minister to his place today and want to place on record my firm commitment to work closely with him and his officials in the days that lie ahead. I wholeheartedly welcome today's statement and, in particular, the speed with which it has been delivered.

As a Member for Upper Bann, I know, as the Minister will know, that Craigavon Area Hospital plays a vital role in the health service. The Minister's clarity today on a proposed way forward in relation to pay parity will mean so much to our hard-working nursing professionals as they continue to carry out the life-saving work within our health service. I pay tribute to them for their resilience and service at what has been a very difficult time.

The Minister mentioned that, in the crisis, much attention has been around pay parity, but a grave concern for many in the medical profession is the issue of safe staffing levels. On a recent visit to Craigavon Area Hospital, I discussed winter pressures. Can the Minister outline what he intends to take forward in relation to recruitment and retainment within our health service to make it a safe place for patients?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. I am sure that, when he was talking about those winter pressures, if it was at the time when he was delivering presents to the children in the children's ward, I commend the Member for taking that action, because a child in a ward over the festive period needs all the positivity they can get. I want to congratulate the Member for taking that initiative.

**Mr Buckley:** Thank you.

**Mr Swann:** Recruitment and retention is a key piece of work in our workforce planning, and we do have to make sure that we value the nurses and the health service workers that we have in place. Today, I hope that, by moving to pay parity with the English level and our reassurances and commitments to safe working standards, we actually start to move to that reassurance that they will stay in their posts longer and will see the health service in Northern Ireland as a good place to work. As Minister, that is where I want to take us.

With regard to recruitment, we will be working with the trade unions on the number of nurse placements we can actually take on. We have to be realistic that a trainee nurse has to have live experience on a ward. While high numbers may look good on paper, we have to make sure that trainees are provided with the training that they actually need to deliver the service that they want to deliver and we want them to deliver.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Thank you very much. Congratulations to yourself. I appreciate the statement that you have brought forward in such a timely fashion. You may have correspondence from me on your desk regarding drugs for cystic fibrosis sufferers and suicide prevention initiatives in North Belfast. I look forward to your response and even meeting you about those.

The Minister and other Members have mentioned the issues with recruitment and retention and workforce planning, particularly around safe staffing. Can the Minister, to the best of his ability today, even through this renewed strategic health partnership forum, try to look seriously at workforce planning, because I, too, remember Agenda for Change in 2004. Our concern is that we are putting public money into private healthcare to the detriment of Health and Social Care workers, effectively privatising a service that needs to be free at the point of delivery.

I wish the Minister well, but, in the coming months and, indeed, the time ahead, I look forward to more substantial plans — if we get this resolved this year — to tackle the big, big issues around workforce planning.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for her question and her two letters. I can assure her that if she has sent me two letters, they are somewhere in the pile that I have received over the past —

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Move them to the top.

**Mr Swann:** We will see, Carál. *[Laughter.]* I make no promises or commitments here today. I remember how you treated me when you were a Minister. *[Laughter.]* It was not too bad, to be fair. *[Laughter.]* With regard to workforce planning, let us not underestimate the scale of the problem it has been, and let us not underestimate how much more difficult it became in the past three years without the strategic leadership that a Minister and elected officials could give.

My engagement today with departmental officials and union officials, and the creation of the strategic health partnership forum, I hope will bring about good things and a truly inclusive, positive engagement process at the head of the Department of Health, and around my ministerial table, because I think that is how it works. It is when we are all playing an integral part, playing the same part, to make sure we are actually delivering for the staff who work for us and for the patients who need us.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I also congratulate the Minister on his appointment. I reiterate our party leader's commitment to working, and not playing party politics, with the portfolio that you carry and the heavy workload that you have.

Minister, in relation to the workforce strategy and, in particular, around the recruitment of, perhaps, mature students, will you commit to looking at best practice elsewhere? I understand that, in the South of Ireland, colleges of further education are used extensively, particularly for the training of mature students.

While there is terrific news for nurses, I believe that it must also include social care staff, because one cannot work without the other.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member. Certainly, if there is best practice out there, then that is how we learn. There is no point in the Department of Health in Northern Ireland trying to recreate a wheel or a functioning body that already works elsewhere. I am happy to commit to doing that and getting my officials set up along those lines.

With regard to the utilisation of mature students and how we introduce them into the workforce, I do not want to repeat what I said previously. Hopefully the utilisation of Magee and bringing forward advanced and mature students up there will have an active role, if we can get the collegiate funding to get that off the ground. However, we also need to be strategic. I am sure that the Member remembers how, in my role in Employment and Learning, I openly promoted the Open University. It has active

training courses for nurses and social workers. I might as well get the plug in now that that is there. It is about how we look at every avenue for enhanced training and bringing mature students and mature employees into the National Health Service. That is what makes it work: when we have that balance and wide range of individuals delivering the health service in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Butler:** I want to take the opportunity to wish Mr Swann all the best in his job as Minister of Health. Indeed, it is possibly one of the most important roles that any of us could perform in elected politics. I look forward to the next few years as he delivers the transformation that is so badly needed. I am sure that the House will join me in thanking the staff who have endured for a number of years and took that really hard decision when they were balloted for action. If you are employed in any facet of a blue-light service, where you are trying to protect and save life, the most difficult thing that you will ever do is take industrial action. Full credit must go to them.

I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he give a ministerial commitment to tackle, through the workforce strategy, in a risk-appropriate manner, the areas of greatest need with regard to workforce planning — in particular, I am thinking about the areas of mental health and learning disability — and look at strategies that have been embarked upon in England to attract staff to those very difficult fields and, indeed, retain those staff?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. It is important that we all acknowledge the role, commitment and support that there is for mental health in the National Health Service in regards to our mental health support teams, activists, charities and commissioners that we have out there. Mental health is an important area in the health and social care system. Parity of esteem between mental health and physical health will be key to that. The Department of Health has been considering actions that can improve mental health provisions for those who need them. I am keen to improve mental health services. I am considering a draft mental health action plan that can take some of those actions forward and put mental health where it should be at the centre of the National Health Service.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Ms Flynn:** Congratulations to Mr Swann on his appointment as Minister of Health. I welcome the measures that he has outlined to resolve

the pay parity issue and, hopefully, bring the industrial action to an end. However, I would also like to highlight some of the serious and genuine ongoing concerns around how we as a society — not necessarily specifically the Department of Health — deal with the complex issue of mental ill health and, indeed, suicide prevention. Can he give assurances that he will fund fully the recently published Protect Life 2 suicide prevention strategy? I should also say that I look forward to engaging with the Minister on these critical issues in the time ahead.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for her question and welcome her to the House.

Protect Life 2 was not specifically mentioned in the statement, but the suicide prevention strategy is critical and central to the Department of Health's work. I will give the Member my commitment to the full implementation of Protect Life 2 when there is realisation of the funding that I require from other Executive colleagues, because it has been costed at between £3 million to £4 million of recurring funding.

In my opinion, it would be money well spent, because it would alleviate pressures from elsewhere in the health service, the Department for Communities and other areas, but, at this point in time, I will need Executive buy-in from colleagues to make sure that we have the support to bring that forward in our Department. I welcome and acknowledge the support that I have received from ministerial colleagues and other parties in taking on this health issue, and the Department of Health will require that collegiate approach. So far, I have been appreciative of that. It is three days in, so we are doing not too bad.

**1.15 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** Off to a good start, Robin.

**Mr Lyttle:** That our Health and Social Care staff regarded strike action as necessary should be a source of serious reflection, if not shame, for the Assembly. Our only response now can be to prioritise the health and well-being of our Health and Social Care staff. Therefore, will the Health Minister assure our nurses and Health and Social Care staff that he will introduce safe staffing legislation to the Assembly, recruit additional nurses and seek to improve nursing bursary provision in order to protect the health and well-being of our Health and Social Care staff in Northern Ireland?

**Mr Swann:** There is a lot in the Member's ask there, and I thank him for his question. When I took over this portfolio, I prioritised pay parity because I thought that was the most critical issue we had to resolve as an Assembly to give us some semblance of credibility, and, again, I am supportive of the other parties that did that.

The Member asked me to take a list of actions. I apologise; I do not remember them all off the top of my head, but I will give him a firm reassurance that, in my first-day brief, which I received on Saturday afternoon and am still reading, the issues and challenges that lie solely in this Department are massive, and the only way we can get the Department of Health to work and work effectively is with the support of every Member and Minister in the House to truly value the individuals whom we have left at the front line on their own for the last three years.

**Mr McCartney:** Comhghairdeas leis an Aire. I congratulate the Minister on what is, obviously, a very challenging portfolio. I welcome the statement. I welcome the speed with which you have met the unions and, hopefully, share your optimism that you have put on the table an offer that will see an end to the industrial action.

A big part of your statement was the historical context of the dispute, but, as we go forward and, particularly, given your own portfolio and the fact that you have got the pledge from all parties to be supportive of you, critical to that is ensuring that we have some mechanism whereby we look at the long-term implications of decisions that are made in the here and now. This is a classic case of, sometimes, a decision being made that, people think, is the right thing to do at one time that only pushes another challenge down the road. We need a commitment from the Minister to ensure that we have a mechanism in place to safeguard us against that.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. I thought it was important to set out the historical reasons why we got to where we are, because I agreed with Chris Lyttle when he said that it should never have happened. We should never have been in a place where we left our nurses so exposed that, after 104 years, they felt industrial action was necessary.

I am optimistic, because I had a good engagement with the unions this morning, but I want to make Members aware that it is now over to them and their boards to make that decision. I have gone as far as I can go, and I think the Executive stretched themselves as to where they allowed me to go with the trade

unions this morning, and I hope that that is reciprocated. The words I used to the trade unions this morning were that, on 18 December, I stood with them: I asked them this morning to stand with me so we can foresee and prevent that industrial action.

In regard to how we bring about that collegiate approach to make sure we offset this in the future, I hope that that strategic health partnership forum that we re-established this morning to get up and running again does some of that foresight, forward-looking programme. We have fantastic officials in the Department of Health — the chief nurse; all the rest of them with practical experience — but it is good to bring our unions in and those on the ground to have that experience sitting round the table. Sometimes, a nurse on a ward can see something that a Minister in an office can never see or realise.

**Ms S Bradley:** Congratulations on your appointment, Mr Speaker. I also welcome the Minister. I congratulate you and assure you of my support as you take on what has to be acknowledged as probably one of the most challenging portfolios.

I welcome the Minister's statement, and, as a South Down MLA who stood outside Daisy Hill with healthcare workers on very damp and wet occasions, I think that it was notable that they expressed how they professionally felt very vulnerable turning up to shifts where there simply were not enough people on duty, only to arrive home to find that they were consistently underpaid. I appreciate that that problem has been compounded through no fault of the Minister but not least because of three years of inaction from the House, of which we should all be ashamed.

Those extremely undervalued healthcare workers have today, hopefully, got the message from the House that they are valued. They stood out there to represent everybody in society, including us, because, unfortunately, the health service is something that each of us at some stage in our life will need to lean on.

I am a little concerned, Minister, when I look through the statement. I appreciate that it was a very swift gathering of resources and a creative way of bringing easement to the problem, but you speak of "easements", which I am curious to know more about. I do not expect that detail, perhaps, today, but I will at a later time. I am keen to know how we put this on a more sustainable footing through efficiencies in the health service. Will the Minister look at every opportunity available to find those efficiencies?

Some may lie in an all-island approach to health, and I urge him to look in that direction.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for her question. I am due to meet the Minister of Finance tomorrow about the budgeting process, before we go back to the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister with regard to where the financial package finishes up.

We have prime examples of where cross-border working works with regard to children's heart surgery, which has been developed and is already working very well. Regarding an all-island health service, I would prefer to stick with the UK's National Health Service, because it is free at the point of use and free at the point of delivery. That is the health service that we in Northern Ireland respect and value, regardless of class, creed, political persuasion or anything else. Our National Health Service in Northern Ireland is something that we should cherish and value. I know that the Member feels the same.

**Mr Beggs:** I congratulate the Minister on his appointment to a challenging post and for his swift engagement with his Executive colleagues, his departmental staff and the trade unions. I hope that we can bring the dispute to an end, have fair pay for our valued healthcare staff and ensure that, in the future, there will be safe working conditions for them all.

The Minister indicates in his statement that there are 7,000 vacancies in the Health and Social Care structure — quite an enormous number — and that transformation is one of the reasons for those vacancies. Can he assure us that, in moving forward, there will be more advance planning, so that staff will be trained in a timely fashion and, when change occurs, we are not left with vacancies and forced to employ expensive locums? Can he also assure us that services will be speedily implemented and improved?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. I do not want to sound like a broken record, but, with the forward-looking, "Change is coming" approach that the Health Department and the health service will need to take, I am hopeful that the strategic health partnership forum will be able to identify the gaps between where we intend going and what we are able to do. I hope that those working on the front line on the wards and in our National Health Service at ground level can identify the gaps between what we expect and what we can get people to do so that those gaps are not so significant that we have to bring in additional staff to plug them. I am putting a lot of reliance

on the strategic health partnership forum, which has not met in a very long time, but it is the right body for engagement so that we can take forward a lot of the challenges, do the forward planning and look into where our difficulties and opportunities lie.

**Mr McGlone:** Comhghairdeachas leis an Aire. I congratulate the Minister on his appointment, and I look forward to dealing with him on a few issues, locally and more regionally. Of course, among the issues are workforce issues, many of which have already been dealt with in some detail here, but particularly those relating to district nursing and health visitors. Will the Minister look at those? We have heard so much today about the difficulties that forced staff to take industrial action. Will the Minister, as a gesture of goodwill, instruct health chiefs not to dock the pay of those staff, many of whom are in difficult financial circumstances? It would be a substantial and significant goodwill gesture on behalf of the Department.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. I assure him that that is not the first time that I have been asked that question today. I cannot give that commitment, because it has not been costed or looked at. However, as an expression of goodwill, pay parity is a significant step towards reassuring our staff in the National Health Service that we value them. The additional conditionality that they will not lose pay is not something that I can commit to here today, and I do not know whether it is something that I can legally do. I will explore it, but I will give no commitment.

**Mr Dallat:** I add my best wishes and support as someone who has, in recent times, been receiving extraordinary medical attention in Altnagelvin Hospital from outstanding doctors and nurses. Will the Minister take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that never again will staff feel so demoralised that they feel the need to join picket lines and that, instead, they are allowed to concentrate on their vocations, which, of course, is in the interests of not just the National Health Service but all of us who have had the experience of benefiting from it?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his question. May I just say how good it is to see you here today? You are looking well.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Swann:** I appreciate the fact that you are here, because I know that, when there is a tough question to be asked of the Health Department, you are able to do it. What you

have asked for here today is, I think, a commitment that everyone in the House should give, not just me as Health Minister. We should never have allowed our health service and our nurses to be pushed to the point where industrial action was the only option they saw to get their message across. They did not want to do it. I know from talking to many of them that it was their last, last resort. I am hopeful that, after today's meeting and today's commitments, we will see them de-escalating that industrial action next week and that the other unions intending to ballot their members on industrial action will find some way of sidestepping that. I hope that the trade unions, through their engagement with me this morning, know that, with me, they have somebody they can talk to and somebody who will listen to them. Again, I am glad to see the Member in his place.

**Ms Bailey:** I also welcome the Minister into office. I commend you for producing the statement in your very short three days in office so far. Very well done.

I go back to the funding numbers that you gave for the in-year easements. I noted that you could not give any particular detail on where they might come from and said that you would speak to the Finance Minister. Will the Minister let us know whether that will come strictly from the health budgets, or will you look for cross-departmental support for that? I am also really keen to know whether the Minister believes that the settlement that has been produced and put forward today could have been achieved before now, in the absence of a local Minister in post.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for her questions. In regard to the easements, it is my understanding that the £79 million that was "assembled" — I think that that was the word that was used — to go towards the 2019-2020 pay parity settlement is all internal Department of Health moneys. I will check that and come back to the Member and verify that.

### 1.30 pm

Do I think that this could have been delivered without a Minister? No. That is very clear. I do not want to get party political about where we are going, but that is why we as a party thought that a Minister, even a direct rule Minister, was needed to introduce this. Not only did we put our health workers in an invidious position but we put our departmental officials in an invidious position, which they should not have been in. They are there to deliver the directions of elected officials, not to take them themselves. Let us go to the step now that there is a

Minister and an Assembly in place and that we will take our responsibilities rather than leaving it to others.

**Mr Allister:** I join the Minister in paying tribute to our remarkable health workers across the service. That was a well-made tribute. In that context, and although it was not the Minister's responsibility, the present dispute arose because a Northern Ireland Executive foolishly broke pay parity in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister take the opportunity today, on behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive, to apologise to the health workers for the breaking of pay parity and taking us into this crisis, which did not otherwise need to have that dimension?

Secondly, I am dismayed to hear that, although the Minister is finding money to sort the pay parity issue, he is having to borrow it from next year. How does he square that along with the assertion that there is no financial money to carry it forward? How does he square that with the boast of the Secretary of State that there was money to deliver a resolution? Is it confirmation that parties signed up to a deal without the certainty of the funding, and how stupid was that?

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Member for his points and questions. I am not in a position to make an apology for a previous Executive. Personally, I apologise to our health service workers, who were left in a position that they felt that strike action was the only option they had. It is incumbent on all of us to get to a position in which that never happens again.

I value the Member's critique of the Executive. I value it and welcome it, because he is able to point out what others may not be able to see or may not want to admit to seeing. When we met the Secretary of State last night, it was very clear, from all the parties, that what had been proposed or offered was not on the table. Now, whether that was the Secretary of State or Treasury's doing, I am not in a position to answer, but I assure the Member that, from the point that we found that out yesterday evening, there was serious engagement between the Department of Finance, the Treasury, the Secretary of State and the Department of Health to ensure that we were in a position today to find the £30 million that is needed in-year this year to provide pay parity.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he confirm that, since no new funding streams were provided as part of the new deal, as confirmed by this announcement, funding streams to resolve industrial action

were already within the capacity of the Health Ministry, proving what parties like People Before Profit and the health workers said from the start: the money was always there for pay parity? Will he also confirm that the new Executive were, indeed, duped by the British and Irish Governments on the promise of funding?

**Mr Swann:** I have to disagree with the Member. The money was not there; we did not have the £30 million that we needed to finish off pay parity for 2019-2020. By bringing moneys forward from the next two years, we will ensure that we can guarantee pay parity for next year as well. I want to give our staff the reassurance that the moneys are there today and in the future. I give the Member a commitment that, to the best of my knowledge, the money was not there to be signed off immediately that could have solved this issue without a Minister being in place.

**Ms Sugden:** I congratulate the Minister, both personally and professionally. I sincerely wish you well. You have taken on the most difficult brief, and the Ulster Unionist Party has to be commended for doing so, as the two parties before them seemed to avoid that brief like the plague.

Thank you for your statement. I appreciate the rapid response in taking the decisions that you have taken. It is very clear that every Member agrees with the actions that you are going to take to try to resolve this pay dispute and, indeed, the issues with safer staffing. I also appreciate the commitment for 2021. It is really important that the workers get that because we are very quickly coming to the end of this financial year.

The figure that very much jumps out at me is the £67 million that has not yet been found, and I expect that it will be, at minimum, another £67 million for the year 2021-22 that you, indeed, would have responsibility for. Altogether, we are looking for £134 million that has not been found anywhere. Indeed, I hope the gentleman down the hill at Stormont House hears those figures, because it is important that he does. In addition to that are all the other pressures in relation to resolving waiting lists, which, indeed, was another commitment that was in the New Decade, New Approach deal. Is the Minister confident that we will be able to secure those moneys? I appreciate all the commitments that he has made to date, but how realistic is it that we will be able to deliver the promises in the new deal and also those in the written commitment that he has put before this House today?

**Mr Swann:** I will start with the latter point. It is a written commitment that I have put before the House today, so I will hold myself responsible, and the Member should know that.

In regard to the rapid engagement with the unions, I want to commend them for their reaction and their speed in taking on the proposal that we put to them this morning, because it is important that we try to forestall any more industrial action because that only adds to the difficulties.

Living wage increases will have to be found and be delivered and, like you, I hope that other people are listening and other people realise that, when our Government in Westminster make an announcement on an increase in the living wage, it has a knock-on effect on other Departments, other industries and other sectors across this United Kingdom.

The Member used one word that I hope I will never hear again and that is "plague", because, in my first-day brief, I found that, if there is an outbreak, I am probably responsible for it as well. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Allister:** I will remember that. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Swann:** No, but I sincerely thank the Member for her support and the critique that she will provide, because I value it and I value her engagement as well.

## Assembly Business

### Election of the Principal Deputy Speaker

**Mr Speaker:** I am pleased to inform you that the technical hitch with the electronic voting recording system has been resolved. All Members have now had an opportunity to pass through the Lobbies and register their vote.

Ayes 49; Noes 31.

#### AYES

#### NATIONALIST:

*Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Miss Sheerin.*

#### UNIONIST:

*Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Weir.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr M Bradley and Mr Robinson.*

#### NOES

#### NATIONALIST:

*Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon.*

#### UNIONIST:

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden.*

#### OTHER:

*Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir, Miss Woods.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Ms Bradshaw and Ms McLaughlin.*

*Total Votes 80 Total Ayes 49 [61.3%]*

*Nationalist Votes 36 Nationalist Ayes 25 [69.4%]*

*Unionist Votes 35 Unionist Ayes 24 [68.6%]*

*Other Votes 9 Other Ayes 0 [0.0%]*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support);*

*That Mr Christopher Stalford be Principal Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.*

**Mr Speaker:** I offer my congratulations to the Principal Deputy Speaker, Christopher Stalford, as the motion has been agreed.

I remind party Whips that the Business Committee is due to meet in 10 minutes, immediately after this session is adjourned. The Business Committee has agreed that, in order to allow time for parties to allocate Committee membership, the next sitting should take place on Monday 20 January 2020, and an Order Paper will be issued today after the Business Committee has met.

*Adjourned at 1.40 pm.*

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