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Easton, Alex (North Down)
Eastwood, Ms Sorcha (Lagan Valley)
Egan, Ms Connie (North Down)
Elliott, Tom (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Ennis, Mrs Sinéad (South Down)
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Ferguson, Mrs Ciara (Foyle)
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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 14 May 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Illegal Migration Act: High Court Judgement

Mr Speaker: Jim Allister has been given leave to make a statement on the High Court judgement relating to the Illegal Migration Act 2023 that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes in which to speak on the subject. I remind Members that interventions are not permitted, and I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has concluded.

Mr Allister: Yesterday, in our High Court, there was a judgement of immense constitutional significance. It was constitutionally significant in that an Act of the sovereign Parliament of the United Kingdom was overruled and set aside because of the supremacy of EU law, which is bestowed by article 2 of the sovereignty-grabbing protocol, subjecting Northern Ireland alone in the United Kingdom to its supremacy, its laws and its rights. The consequence, of course, given the subject, is that Northern Ireland will now become a magnet for illegal migrants, flooding into Northern Ireland to escape the potential consequences that lie within the Rwanda scheme.

The political consequences also extend to the fact that yesterday's judgement saw the wheels come off the DUP's 'Safeguarding the Union' document that brought it back to the House. In that document, which the DUP brought and sold to the people of Northern Ireland, there is a blatant lie in paragraph 46, where it states:

"the Windsor Framework applies only in respect of the trade in goods".

I and others told the DUP that that was not so, and now the High Court equally says that it is not so.

We had DUP figures protesting the providence of 'Safeguarding the Union'. Gavin Robinson told us that it was:

"important ... in maintaining and securing our position"

in the United Kingdom. Mr Brooks of this House, in an article penned under his name in the 'News Letter', told us that it had ended dynamic alignment. Yesterday, however, paragraph 65 of the judgement expressly declared that dynamic alignment with EU law continues. We had Jeffrey Donaldson and the Secretary of State waving the document in Hillsborough Castle.

It was the DUP's document, but the wheels have now come off it. My call to the DUP today is to disavow this Union-dismantling document. It was a contrived fable and a dangerous deceit, and it needs to be disavowed by any unionist.

Mr Brooks: This is the Rwanda issue. The DUP has long warned about how the law will apply in Northern Ireland. It is imperative that immigration policy apply equally across every part of the United Kingdom. We, as unionists, are clear that our national Parliament should have the ability to make decisions on immigration that are applicable nationally.

We repeatedly warned that the Government's efforts on immigration and other issues would not apply in Northern Ireland because of article 2 of the protocol. The Government repeatedly closed their mind to the incompatibility of the Rwanda legislation with the Northern Ireland protocol. Our concerns have now been accepted by the High Court in Belfast.

We presented the Government with an opportunity during the passage of the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill through the House of Commons and the House of Lords to accept an amendment that would have put beyond doubt what they claim to be the case with the scheme's operation. It is telling that the Government chose not to accept it.

The ruling must be a watershed in the Government's approach. For Ministers to ignore what the courts have said would not merely be a case of sleepwalking into the creation of an immigration border in the Irish Sea but rather of embarking on such a path with eyes wide open. If that were the case, it would not only be a constitutional affront but make Northern Ireland a magnet for asylum seekers looking to escape enforcement in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Our critics say that we should not bank but should abandon any of the progress that has been made through 'Safeguarding the Union' in favour of no progress on any issues of import to Northern Ireland's economic and constitutional interests within the United Kingdom. Such an outlook has not furthered and will not further the cause of unionism in this place. The problems did not originate in the 'Safeguarding the Union' Command Paper; they stem from the withdrawal agreement and the protocol that this party voted against in the House of Commons. Some of our detractors and their friends did not.

Ms Ennis: The High Court judgement yesterday proves that the British Government's Illegal Migration Act is unworkable and is not compliant with human rights. We want to see an immigration system that is fair, effective, enforced and, above all, human rights-compliant. The legislation is cruel and inhumane and has been rightly criticised and challenged by human rights bodies, including the Human Rights Commission. The British Government must now listen to those concerns and to the High Court judgement and ensure that there is no diminution of rights, as promised in previous agreements.

Ms Bradshaw: We in the Alliance Party welcome the High Court ruling yesterday and congratulate the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission for taking the case. In recent years, my colleague Stephen Farry has highlighted how UK immigration policy has contradicted human rights protections in Northern Ireland. It is encouraging that the Windsor framework and, behind it, the Good Friday Agreement are protecting Northern Ireland from the UK Government's horrible immigration legislation over the course of this Parliament. The ruling will hopefully have implications for the appalling Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024.

The UK Government should now repeal both Acts and put in place an alternative humanitarian policy for dealing with migration based on the provision of more safe and legal routes, faster processing of asylum claims and a better focus on integrating refugees into our

economy and society. Ultimately, we need to challenge and change the toxic narrative that has grown around immigration and refugees over recent years.

Migration is a global reality, yet relatively few migrants come to the UK and Ireland, in comparison with the rest of the world. We need to move away from the politics of setting people against each other, invest in better public services for all and permit refugees to work and pay taxes.

I am the Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office, and I am joined in the Chamber today by the Deputy Chair, my colleague Connie Egan. This is something that we will keep a close eye on and come back to at a future meeting of the Committee.

Mr Beattie: We all need a bit of honesty and integrity sometimes. The protocol created the Irish Sea border. It was neither serious nor sensible. It certainly did not brilliantly outmanoeuvre the Brussels trap. The Windsor framework did not get rid of the Irish Sea border. Two years of boycott did not get rid of the Irish Sea border. 'Safeguarding the Union' did not get rid of the Irish Sea border. Paragraph 46 of that document is completely incorrect in what it states. That document should never have been signed up to.

We have an issue with immigration throughout the whole of the United Kingdom. Immigration is an issue globally, right across these islands, Europe and the world, and we need to deal with it sensibly. However, we need to be absolutely honest about where we are with our people, who are looking in: 'Safeguarding the Union' achieved absolutely zero, after two years of one-to-one negotiation with the Government.

Mr Carroll: Across this island, we have a crisis, but, contrary to some views that have been expressed in the House, and by the Tories and mainstream, right-wing and illiberal media, we do not have a problem or crisis with migration or asylum seekers. We have a problem with landlord-ism across this country, in which hundreds of thousands of homes lie empty. Rather than blaming greedy landlords or governments, nefarious forces are blaming brothers and sisters who want to and try to come to these shores.

It is quite cruel and ironic that the people who are normally the loudest champions of Britain's foreign policy, which has created hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of refugees across the Middle East and Africa, are content and

happy with that policy and are cheerleaders for it. They then have the temerity to stick the boot into people who risk their lives on dinghies to seek shelter and safety here. People go to sea because the land is more dangerous. The real enemy arrives by limousine, not by boat.

Executive Ministers need to make it clear that they will not comply with the Rwanda Act or any other hated anti-human, anti-asylum-seeker legislation that is passed by the current British Government, or any incoming one. Disgracefully, last week, the deputy First Minister repeated the lie that immigration puts pressure on public services. It does not. That is not true; it is a myth. She needs to immediately retract that statement.

People here are terrified of the Home Office and its disgraceful "hostile environment" policies. In recent days, I have been working to support an individual who has been here for more than 10 years. His family has been granted the right to remain, but he is terrified of being deported to Rwanda or somewhere else. People have a right to resist deportation. I support them in resisting deportation. Shame on the Home Office. Shame on the British Government for their detested, racist and reactionary attacks on migrants, asylum seekers and people who are seeking refuge here.

Mr Speaker: I will just pass comment on a comment that was made by Mr Carroll about a Member repeating a lie. That is unacceptable, and there have been previous indiscretions from that source. I warn you, Mr Carroll: be careful with your language. If you continue in that vein, you will not be called for some time.

Members' Statements

Mr Speaker: The usual rules apply to Members' statements.

Nakba

Mr Sheehan: Amárach beidh Palaistínigh ar fud an domhain ag comóradh an Nakba. Is é Nakba an focal Araibise ar thubaiste. Is é an téarma a úsáideann na Palaistínigh le cur síos ar an ghlánadh eitneach óna dtír féin in 1948, nuair a cuireadh níos mó ná 750,000 Palaistíneach as a dteach féin. Maraíodh níos mó ná 15,000 Palaistíneach ag an am sin.

10.45 am

Is é Nakba an téarma a úsáideann siad fosta le cur síos ar an díláithriú agus ar an ghéarleanúint atá ag dul ar aghaidh i gcónaí. Cé gur éirigh leis na Síónaigh an aisling s'acu tír dhúchais Ghiúdach a bhunú sa Phalaistín in 1948, lean an glánadh eitneach agus an díláithriú ar aghaidh.

Le linn an chogaidh Arabaigh-Iosraelaigh in 1967, ghabh na hIosraelaigh seilbh ar a bhí fágtha de chríocha na bPalaistíneach: Iarúsailéim Thoir, an Bruach Thiar agus Gaza. Tá seilbh acu ar na críocha úd go fóill. Is é sin an fáth a dtugar na "críocha faoi fhorghabháil" orthu. Tá a fhios againn go bhfuil na hIosraelaigh ag leanúint ar aghaigh ag tógáil lonnaíochtaí neamhdhleathacha ar thalamh a ghoid siad ó na Palaistínigh.

Le bliain anuas, tá breis agus 400 Palaistíneach maraithe ag na hIosraelaigh sa Bhuach Thiar. Mar sin de, nuair a chluinim sna meáin nár thosaigh an marú go dtí an 7 Deireadh Fómhair anuraidh, tá a fhios agam nach bhfuil ann ach bréag agus bolscaireacht. Anois tá níos mó ná 35,000 marú in Gaza, an chuid is mó acu páistí agus mná. Ach ina measc chomh maith, tá dochtúirí, iriseoirí agus oibrithe cabhrach. Tá otharlanna, scoileanna, ollscoileanna, eaglaisí agus moscanna scriosta ag na hIosraelaigh chomh maith. Is cuma le Netanyahu faoi bheatha na ndaoine in Gaza, gan trácht ar na hinstiúidí a choinníonn daoine beo. Ach ní féidir leis na Palaistínigh uile a mharú. Níl sin ag dul a tharlú.

Má tá réiteach ag dul a bheith ann, tá gá le sos cogaidh láithreach. Caithfidh na hIosraelaigh cabhair daoine a ligean isteach go Gaza agus a shaighdiúirí a tharraingt amach go hiomlán. Caithfidh deireadh a theacht ar an fhorghabháil

agus, ar deireadh thiar thall, caithfidh stát neamhspleách Palaistíneach a bheith ann.

[Translation: Tomorrow, Palestinians across the world will commemorate the Nakba. Nakba is the Arabic word for catastrophe. It is the term that Palestinians use to describe the ethnic cleansing of their country in 1948 when over 750,000 were driven from their homes. More than 15,000 Palestinians were killed at that time.

Nakba is also the term that they use to describe the ongoing displacement and persecution. Even though the Zionists fulfilled their dream of establishing their own Jewish homeland in Palestine in 1948, the process of ethnic cleansing and displacement carried on.

During the Arab-Israeli war in 1967, the Israelis occupied what was left of the Palestinian territories: East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. They still occupy those territories. That is why they are called the "occupied territories". We know also that the Israelis are continuing to build illegal settlements on land stolen from the Palestinians.

In the past year, the Israelis have killed more than 400 Palestinians in the West Bank. Therefore, when I hear in the media that the killing only began on 7 October last year, I know that that is just a lie and propaganda. Now there are more than 35,000 dead in Gaza, most of them children and women. However, also among the dead are doctors, journalists and aid workers. Hospitals, schools, universities, churches and mosques have been destroyed. Netanyahu cares nothing about the lives of the people in Gaza, much less the institutions that sustain life. However, he cannot kill every Palestinian. That is not going to happen.

For a resolution to happen there must be an immediate ceasefire. The Israelis must allow humanitarian aid in and completely withdraw all their military. The occupation must end, and, at the end of the day, there must be an independent, Palestinian state.]

Queen Elizabeth II Primary School in West Tyrone

Mr T Buchanan: I bring some good news about Queen Elizabeth II Primary School in west Tyrone. Queen Elizabeth II Primary School at Kilskeery in west Tyrone was built and opened in 1953 during the Queen's coronation year and was one of only two schools to be named after Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. For over 70 years, the school has served the rural

community with distinction, providing a high quality of educational excellence. At its most-recent Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) inspection, the report deemed the school to be outstanding in its quality of educational achievement, having stable enrolment trends, being in a sound financial position, demonstrating strong leadership and management, having strong links with all sections of the community and being a vibrant school within the rural community. Yet, despite the excellent report, the Education Authority (EA) decided that, because it failed to meet the 105 pupil enrolment policy, it should close.

Since 2017, the Education Authority, through its area planning, has done all in its power to close the school, which is the very hub of the rural community. Closure was planned for the summer of this year. However, in April, the closure plans were postponed by the Education Minister. Having reviewed the Education Authority's recommendation for closure, he declined to approve it as of yesterday, resulting in the Queen Elizabeth II Primary School being allowed to remain open. The axe of closure has now been lifted, and the school can remain open.

It is an excellent result and, indeed, the correct result for the school and the rural community. On behalf of the board of governors, the teachers and parents, I pass on their thanks to the Minister for his intervention. However, I issue a challenge to the Education Authority that, rather than pursuing its aims to close smaller rural schools that are in such good standing, ripping the heart from rural communities, it must pursue a different agenda by working in collaboration with the smaller rural schools to help strengthen and sustain them through a number of various other mechanisms.

The parents, board of governors and teaching staff of Queen Elizabeth II Primary School have demonstrated great resilience during the EA's pursuit of closure over the past five years, and I now challenge the EA to work with the school to repair the damage caused to it in those years.

Science On Stage Festival: Banbridge High School

Mr Beattie: I hope to lift the mood a little. This year's Science on Stage Europe Festival will take place in mid-August in Turku, Finland. I will give a shout-out to Mrs Hawthorne, head of science at Banbridge High School, who has been selected to be part of the UK team that will travel to Finland to present its innovative

teaching ideas. Mrs Hawthorne is the only teacher from Northern Ireland who has been selected to attend, and she will be one of 450 primary and secondary school teachers from all over Europe who will share their most creative STEM ideas at stands, workshops and highlight sessions.

The theme is "Sustainability in STEM", and Mrs Hawthorne's ideas will form part of a programme of events that will include over 30 countries. Her fellow teachers, her pupils and their parents will all be proud of Mrs Hawthorne's achievements and will wish her well, and I know that the House will also wish her well. They are now in the game of fundraising to make sure that she can get there and has the equipment to be able to present her ideas. If anybody here has the ability to help with that fundraising or knows of a really good Minister who might be able to give some money towards it, that would be very much appreciated.

Ballynafeigh Community Development Association: 50th Anniversary

Ms Bradshaw: I congratulate Ballynafeigh Community Development Association on reaching 50 years of service to the mid-Ormeau Road community last week. I recently visited the centre and was blown away by the breadth and quality of the projects and services that are delivered through that busy resource centre. It is worth noting that Ballynafeigh Community Development Association was established in 1974 by a collective of local residents who were concerned about growing sectarian tension in the area and, unfortunately, a degree of ethnic cleansing. The residents were also concerned about the lack of social housing in the area and how that impacted on the area's ability to maintain its original harmony as a shared neighbourhood. To this day, the association's core purpose remains to build a shared neighbourhood and provide a safe and welcoming place for people from all backgrounds.

The community house's success is based on its blend of core projects, which include its advice centre, summer scheme, talking therapies and health and well-being programme and on its housing of other organisations such as Migrant Help and Belfast City of Sanctuary. The house also provides space to 130 other groups that regularly meet there, including Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, dance groups, arts projects and so on.

In closing, I highlight the association's vision:

"a vibrant and diverse neighbourhood with a generous spirit supported by a dynamic community association which acts as a catalyst for change and development."

That is a vision that we can all get behind for our entire society.

Narrow Water Bridge

Mr McNulty: I feel enormous pride at the news of the appointment of a contractor for the Narrow Water bridge project, with work scheduled to commence immediately. First and foremost, I think of the late PJ Bradley, who was an SDLP MLA for South Down and whose vision for a bridge at Narrow Water never wavered. Even when some said that it would never happen and others said that it should not happen, PJ Bradley never lost faith in making that vision a reality. Indeed, after PJ's passing, his daughter Sinéad Bradley, who succeeded him as an MLA, fought tooth and nail to ensure that the Narrow Water bridge project was included in the 'New Decade, New Approach' deal in 2020.

The announcement that the Narrow Water bridge project is definitely happening is extraordinary and transformative news for communities on both sides of Carlingford lough and all those who campaigned for many years to see the vision for that iconic cross-border project realised. I pay tribute to the Irish Government for their commitment to the Narrow Water bridge project. It is worth noting that they are the sole funders of the project and that, under the auspices of the then Taoiseach Micheál Martin's Shared Island unit, they had the foresight and wisdom to facilitate the inclusion of a lifting bridge in order to keep the local maritime history alive and preserve access to the historic Albert Basin and Newry ship canal, which is the oldest shipping canal on these islands.

I must confess, however, that some of my delight is tinged with dismay. I am literally scratching my head at the fact that the forward-thinking nature of the project is being undermined by the short-sighted and ill-guided decision in the same month by a Sinn Féin Infrastructure Minister to cement the decision on a fixed bridge a mere few hundred metres upstream in the estuary. My party's vision for the delivery of a truly North/South project at Narrow Water is being countermanded by the baffling fixed bridge decision on the southern relief road. So much for Sinn Féin's all-Ireland

vision, or is that just for posters and echo chambers? I have lobbied extensively for the reversal of that decision, and my colleagues on Newry, Mourne and Down District Council have called on the Minister to see sense.

I hope beyond hope that today's announcement and the realisation that Narrow Water bridge is progressing at pace will encourage the Minister to wake up and see the error of his ways. That is my message, and I will not let it go. We have come too far and too many have fought too hard to have that visionary project overshadowed by bureaucratic, small-minded, no-vision nonsense.

Narrow Water Bridge

Ms Ennis: I, too, want to reflect on the announcement yesterday of the awarding of the contract to build Narrow Water bridge. It definitely feels like a watershed moment for the people of South Down and those who live in the Carlingford lough region, because, of course, it is a cross-border project. The people whom I represent have waited decades for that transformative project to finally get off the ground, and it really feels like we are at that point now. We have waited so long and have persevered to have the project realised because we know that it is more than just an infrastructure project. Narrow Water bridge, as I have said before, is key to unlocking the huge tourism and economic potential that we have in South Down and across the Carlingford lough region.

I pay tribute to the community groups and politicians from across the spectrum who have kept faith with the project, particularly my Sinn Féin colleagues on both sides of the lough, who have kept the project firmly on the agenda of both Governments over the decades. However, it is the people across South Down and those of Warrenpoint and of Cooley in County Louth who have really pushed the project and made us strive to get to where we are today: on the cusp of the project actually breaking ground.

We look forward to seeing the Narrow Water bridge progress at pace, but, of course, building the bridge is just the starting point. The work does not end there. Once we have the bridge in place, we need to capitalise on the economic and tourism potential that it will bring. The bridge will open up the entire east border region. I and my Sinn Féin colleagues in County Louth will make sure that we are in place and ready to capitalise on all the positives that will come from the Narrow Water bridge.

Again, I pay tribute to everybody who has put their shoulder to the wheel and got us to where we are today. We look forward to seeing boots on the ground and work finally beginning at Narrow Water.

Dementia Action Week

Mrs Erskine: Yesterday, in Parliament Buildings, we had a powerful event organised by the Alzheimer's Society in Northern Ireland to mark the start of Dementia Action Week. During the event, we saw a new video telling the stories of six people, which was launched to highlight what it is like to care for somebody who is living with dementia. Those stories were beautifully portrayed and shone a light on the realities. It really resonated with someone who has family members living with dementia.

As part of the launch of Dementia Action Week, the Alzheimer's Society unveiled new research. That research puts a light on the financial and emotional toll on families but also emphasises the importance of early and accurate diagnosis, whilst calling on the Northern Ireland Assembly to urgently prioritise dementia diagnosis to help families. The new research revealed that the cost of dementia care in Northern Ireland has hit almost £1 billion per year and could soar to more than £2 billion by 2040. Across the UK, just 1.4% of the money spent on dementia healthcare goes towards diagnosis and treatment. The majority of costs come from social care, which is 40%, and unpaid care, which represents 50%.

More than 24,000 people are living with the condition in Northern Ireland, yet it is estimated that one third of people affected have not received a diagnosis. The charity reports that an ageing population means that dementia in the UK population will increase by 43% by 2040, with the biggest increase in Northern Ireland.

11.00 am

Dementia is a difficult illness, but timely diagnosis, the right intervention and support can make all the difference. Dementia diagnosis should not be the end of the story. I know what it has been like for my family. The person is still there and deserves to have the right to care, particularly when they cannot use their own voice to articulate what they need. We do not know how many of us in the Chamber may be in the same position one day. It is not just an old person's illness, and it is not just somebody who is doting. We need to act. We need to put this right for people who have

dementia and put in place the right support for them in the here and now.

Non-teaching Staff: Strike Action

Mr Mathison: Today, we had confirmation that the unions representing non-teaching staff are planning strike action again next week and in June, totalling five days of action. Non-teaching staff were rightly dismayed when the Finance Minister did not allocate any budget to the long-overdue pay and grading review, instead leaving us reliant on the reprofiling of transformation money from Treasury to fund it. That is not how we should fund vital interventions in our education system, and it remains profoundly disappointing that this was not delivered via the appropriate budget allocation.

Parents will be deeply concerned. It will disproportionately impact on children with special educational needs and special schools. The most vulnerable children and families under the most strain should not pay the price for the failure to deliver the pay and grading review over many years. Neither should we pit workers vital to the education system against parents and children. Therefore, I urge the Finance Minister, in the first instance, to urgently update the Assembly on what work is being undertaken with Treasury and to redouble the efforts to secure the funding that is needed. I hope that, if an update detailing meaningful progress can be provided, perhaps the action can be paused and disruption avoided for schools and families.

I urge all stakeholders in the process to do all that they can to secure the funding from Treasury, and I urge the Education Authority and the Education Minister to engage urgently with the trade unions to resolve the dispute.

Narrow Water Bridge

Mr McGrath: I welcome the news about the €60 million contract that has been awarded for the construction of Narrow Water bridge. The fact that we have multiple representatives speaking about it in the Chamber today shows not only how important it is to the people of south Down but how neglected south Down has been for many years by Executives when it came to prioritising funding for our community. Therefore, we are very excited to hear the news that there will be a huge investment, albeit mostly from Dublin.

The work is due to commence in a few short weeks, and it is hoped that the bridge will be

completed by 2027. The delivery has been achieved only through the tenacity and commitment of many people in the south Down community. I think of a number of my party representatives who worked exceptionally hard, going back 30 or more years, to try to deliver it. That gives you a sense of how long the people of south Down have had to wait for investment, and then we do not get it from this Executive.

I particularly want to thank my colleagues the late Eddie McGrady and PJ Bradley, Councillor Declan McAteer, Sinéad Bradley, Margaret Ritchie and Karen McKeivitt. Those are all individuals who had elected office over the years and worked their hardest to try to deliver the bridge. I also thank Colum Eastwood, our party leader, who worked tirelessly with successive Taoisigh to help to deliver the Shared Ireland unit, which is where the funding is coming from to deliver the project. I also thank the Louth TD Fergus O'Dowd, who will step down this year. I am sure that he will see the news as the culmination of his work over the years.

The most important people to thank are the tireless community representatives — the Narrow Water Bridge Community Network — who have worked over generations to keep the project on the political agenda and keep it alive to ensure that it will be delivered. Without their efforts and commitment on the ground, the project would not have been delivered. There is massive potential for tourism and hospitality throughout south Down and the Cooley peninsula that can be maximised in the years ahead. That will bring prosperity to our area. It is an exciting day. The people of south Down are exceptionally happy. We welcome the work of everyone to deliver that project.

Omagh Bomb Inquiry

Mr McCrossan: I welcome the announcement that the Omagh bomb inquiry hearings will start in July. As Members know, on 15 August 1998, the worst atrocity of the Troubles occurred in the town of Omagh in my constituency, where 29 innocent people were killed by a Real IRA bomb that was driven into the centre of the town. For 26 years, families have campaigned tirelessly for truth and justice, and have taken multiple cases to various courts seeking out that truth and some recognition of their honest belief that that bomb could have been prevented. That was confirmed by Justice Horner in a recent determination, in which he said that it was plausible that there was a real prospect that the Omagh bomb could have been prevented by security forces. That prompted the

then Secretary of State to announce the much-anticipated and long-awaited public inquiry into the events of that dreadful, terrible day.

The Omagh families are relieved that there has been some recognition of their pain and of the need for truth as to what happened and whether the bomb could have been prevented, thereby saving the lives of their loved ones and preventing injury to countless others. I hope that the inquiry will shine a very bright light on some of the very real concerns that I and other elected representatives from West Tyrone, as representatives of the people of Omagh, have had, and on the families, who have worked tirelessly to seek out the truth. I think today about Michael Gallagher, who lost his son; Stanley McComb, who lost his wife; Kevin Skelton, who lost his wife; and the countless other Omagh families who have waited for the inquiry to begin. It will be a tough time for the people of Omagh, Tyrone and beyond as we all remember the deep and lasting scars of that terrible, terrible day.

It is hoped that, as recommended by Justice Horner, the Irish Government will also take forward an inquiry to ensure that the full picture is put on the table to unravel what happened on that day and get truth for the families. I was told by the previous Taoiseach that they would consider that when terms of reference were announced for the public inquiry. Unfortunately, that has not yet happened. I call again on the Taoiseach and the Irish Government to announce their public inquiry so that the Omagh families can get to the truth.

PSNI Surveillance: Journalists

Mr Carroll: I want to raise the issue of police spying on journalists in this state. I would like to say that I am shocked to hear that the PSNI put so many journalists under surveillance. It really should come as a shock that the PSNI accessed the phone bills of journalists who have carried out their important democratic function of holding the state to account, but it is hardly a first offence by the PSNI. It is not the first time that that police force has targeted and attempted to criminalise journalists or anyone who challenges the ruling establishment or uncovers the crimes that it has committed. Can you imagine the outcry in this Building if China or Russia were spying on journalists in this state?

We are all familiar with the arrest and attempted prosecution of journalists Trevor Birney and Barry McCaffrey, who were pursued for exposing the truth of the Loughinisland atrocity.

Instead of pursuing those who were involved in the murder of six civilians, the PSNI tried to prosecute journalists for exposing RUC collusion. That should tell us a lot about whose interests the PSNI serves and the justice that is afforded to us in this supposed democracy. At every turn, it has used its power to pervert and frustrate the course of justice. The PSNI has been at the vanguard of the state's attempts to deny victims and their bereaved families justice and to cover up the crimes of the RUC and muddy the waters of any investigation of crimes sanctioned by the Government. We all know what the PSNI is about, but the surveillance of so-called troublemaker journalists should be a watershed moment for everybody in this Building.

I express my support for all those journalists who may be affected, reiterate the fact that journalism is not a crime and reaffirm the right of journalists to carry out their duties without any interference from the PSNI. The PSNI should come clean about its actions. It should state which journalists it had under surveillance and why, but we should know not to expect the truth from that discredited police force. The Justice Minister needs to set up an independent public inquiry into the PSNI surveillance of journalists. I am prepared to be corrected on this, but I have not seen nor heard a single word of condemnation from the Justice Minister. There seems to be no amount of controversy, scandal or wrongdoing by the PSNI that the Justice Minister and the Executive are not prepared to wash their hands of.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I cannot.

We are continuously told that these are operational matters for the PSNI. Is it an operational matter for the PSNI when it withholds files of families bereaved in the Troubles, covering up for the devastation wrought by the state and its paramilitary proxies, the firing of lethal plastic bullets at children and teenagers, and arrests and strip-searching of children? The list goes on. The public need to know how deep the rot goes. Is the PSNI spying on political activists, MLAs, human rights workers and any other so-called troublemakers who challenge the state? It needs to come clean and be upfront about that. The Executive and the Policing Board cannot sit idly by while the PSNI —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Carroll: — interferes with basic democratic rights. It is time for a public inquiry.

Mrs Long: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Mr Carroll asked me to clarify my position on this matter. To be clear, this is, first and primarily — as I have said in public statements, contrary to what the Member suggested — a matter for the Policing Board. That does not mean that there would be no involvement in the Department of Justice were the Policing Board not to be able to take it forward, but it does mean that it is first and primarily for the Policing Board. I have indeed spoken publicly on the issue.

Mr Speaker: It is not a point of order, but the Member has clarified something.

Ministerial Statements

Intergovernmental Agreement on Cooperation on Criminal Justice Matters

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister of Justice, I remind Members that there will be opportunities for questions, not long interventions.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement regarding a bilateral meeting under the auspices of the intergovernmental agreement (IGA) on cooperation on criminal justice matters, which was held virtually on Wednesday 11 April 2024. I represented the Executive at the bilateral meeting with Minister Helen McEntee, the Minister of Justice in Ireland. I am committed to keeping the Assembly informed of the important work being carried out under the auspices of the IGA. Cross-border cooperation on justice matters is vital to both of our jurisdictions. It is always a welcome opportunity to meet our Irish Government counterparts so that we can discuss the range of cross-border initiatives and share learning on issues affecting both jurisdictions. The IGA contributes greatly to ensuring that we are doing everything that we can to promote good practice in those areas.

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

The meeting on 11 April provided Minister McEntee and I with the opportunity to review progress against and close the IGA's 2021-23 joint work plan and to agree the new work plan for 2023-25. The development and enhancement of cooperation under the agreement is taken forward by a number of project advisory groups, covering the areas of public protection, forensic science, youth justice, victims' issues and criminal justice and social diversity issues. I put on record my thanks to all the members of the five project advisory groups, who have continued to deliver on a wide range of extremely important issues. I will provide Members with a summary of some of the key highlights of the work that was completed under the previous work programme and provide a flavour of some of the issues that the IGA project advisory groups will be focusing on during the next reporting period.

The support for victims project advisory group continues to meet biannually to share information on victim strategies, new legislation and the implementation of recommendations

flowing from the Gillen and O'Malley reviews. In particular, that project advisory group has a special interest in ongoing work to address domestic abuse, sexual violence and human trafficking. In addition to regular engagement on general victim policy issues, as part of its work in the 2023-25 work plan, the support for victims project advisory group will continue to share experiences and learning from recent awareness-raising work to highlight victims' rights, and there will also be a specific bilateral event in relation to domestic homicide reviews. The group is also planning to hold a bilateral online seminar, led by the Justice Ministers, to share experience, learning and best practice in relation to pilots and programmes that have been established from the O'Malley and Gillen reviews to support victims in the criminal justice system.

Excellent working relationships are in place between Forensic Science Northern Ireland and Forensic Science Ireland. The forensic science project advisory group provides a mechanism to strengthen these arrangements.

In the 2021-23 reporting period, the group undertook regular meetings to share information and best practice on a range of forensic science issues, including toxicology and fingerprint analysis. Later this year, as part of the 2023-25 work plan, Forensic Science Northern Ireland will host a continuing professional development (CPD) event for all toxicology providers in Northern Ireland and Ireland. That builds on the success of a similar event held in Dublin last year and provides a forum for information exchange on current scientific processes and developments.

11.15 am

During the 2021-23 reporting period, the criminal justice and social diversity project advisory group attended a cross-border conference in Monaghan. The conference brought together operational and community police officers from the PSNI and an Garda Síochána (AGS) border areas and provided an opportunity to agree a plan of action to increase knowledge and awareness of organised crime and crime prevention as well as a forum in which to discuss challenges and learning on asylum seekers entering both jurisdictions in specific regions and policing districts.

Legislative progress on hate crime is at different stages in each jurisdiction. The project advisory group is therefore currently focusing on sharing good practice in relation to various challenges and the impacts, for example, of far-right

influence on incidents and crimes with a hate motivation.

During the 2023-25 reporting period, the criminal justice and social diversity project advisory group has plans in place to attend respective community-focused events, including but not limited to the following communities highlighted in the work plan: minority ethnic communities; the Travelling community; LGBTQ+ communities; persons with disabilities; and refugees and asylum seekers.

During the 2021-23 reporting period, the public protection project advisory group held a number of seminars and meetings on a range of topics, including the police response to domestic violence. The group also held information sessions to develop knowledge and to improve systems for effective public protection arrangements.

The annual seminar is a highlight in the public protection work plan and provides a valuable opportunity for the criminal justice agencies, policymakers and practitioners to come together to enhance cooperation and further develop capability and learning from one another in areas of mutual interest. The fourteenth annual cross-border public protection advisory group seminar was held in Belfast at Ulster University on 1 December 2023. The seminar theme was "Opportunities and challenges for delivering criminal justice in a changing environment". The attendees considered new and innovative practice and explored ways in which to further develop and increase partnership working.

Formal arrangements between the Probation Service and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) for the management of offenders moving between jurisdictions was revised and signed off by both services in March 2022. The 'Irish Probation Journal' has reached a special milestone this year, and, to mark it, the twenty-first edition of the journal will feature a range of articles that have been published over the past 20 years that chart the trends in criminal justice and tell the story of how probation practice has developed as a result of evidence-based research. The collective publications provide a historical record of the development of probation practice on this island. The twenty-first edition of the journal will be launched in November 2024.

The youth justice project advisory group offers the opportunity to share experiences of and lessons learned on strategy and policy. During the 2021-23 reporting period, a number of visits and exchanges took place, including senior

staff from Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre visiting Oberstown and cross-border visits between the Donegal Youth Diversion Project and an Garda Síochána and the Youth Justice Agency of Northern Ireland. The group also supported a successful joint bid to the Shared Island initiative from the University of Limerick and Queen's University Belfast for the creation of a North/South research hub on youth justice called Stable Lives Safer Streets. The youth justice project advisory group will continue to develop areas of policy and practical cooperation through visits and information sharing and, where appropriate, adopt learning from the North/South research hub.

It is encouraging to see tangible outputs in the 2021-23 work plan, the activities planned under the 2023-25 work plan and the positive engagement that continues across all the project advisory groups.

I take the opportunity to update Members on the joint agency task force (JATF), which was instituted under the Fresh Start Agreement. The task force is led by senior officers from the PSNI, an Garda Síochána, the Revenue Commissioners and HM Revenue and Customs. At the meeting, senior officers from the Police Service of Northern Ireland and an Garda Síochána provided an update on the cross-border joint agency task force report, which covers the period from 1 April to 30 September 2023. There continue to be high levels of cooperation and operational activity among the various law enforcement agencies involved in tackling the six priority areas: rural crime; drugs; financial crime; trafficking in human beings, including children; excise fraud; and organised immigration crime.

The rural crime priority area continues to focus resources on tackling mobile organised crime gangs through ongoing collaboration and dedicated days of action. In June 2023, an Garda Síochána and the Police Service of Northern Ireland took part in a highly visible cross-border operation targeting criminal activity in the south Armagh, Newry, Monaghan and Dundalk border areas. The operation consisted of checkpoints and the use of automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) technology, with a view to targeting vehicles and persons associated with criminality, specifically those involved in a number of commercial and domestic burglaries that had taken place around that time. As a result of the operation, a 34-year-old male was arrested on suspicion of a number of offences, including theft and GBH.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland's organised crime branch and Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau continue to work closely in tackling exploitation of the common travel area by organised crime gangs involved in the large-scale importation and distribution of class A and B drugs. The consistent collaborative engagement has resulted in increased detection at ports in both jurisdictions, revealing the highly sophisticated concealment methods being used by organised crime gangs to import, in particular, class A drugs. In September 2023, following liaison between an Garda Síochána, the joint agency task force and international partners, a bulk carrier travelling from South America was intercepted. That action culminated in the seizure of 2.2 tons of cocaine. Investigative enquiries conducted by the PSNI organised crime branch assisted with the arrest and prosecution of eight males.

An Garda Síochána and the Police Service of Northern Ireland have carried out various joint days of action in the crime areas of human trafficking, sexual exploitation and organised prostitution. Due to the international aspect of human trafficking, the two police forces are constantly collaborating on emerging trends and adapting to the changing environments that exist. During this reporting period, the Police Service of Northern Ireland's modern slavery and human trafficking unit and an Garda Síochána's human trafficking investigation and coordination unit have respectively recorded 225 and 18 persons who presented as potential victims of human trafficking.

Detectives from the Police Service of Northern Ireland's modern slavery and human trafficking unit carried out a significant operation on the activities of an organised crime gang suspected of being involved in the trafficking of young women into Northern Ireland for the purposes of sexual exploitation. The operation resulted in the arrest of two males and one female for sexual exploitation, prostitution and money laundering related to those offences. The investigation is ongoing, but it is believed that the organised crime gang operated by enticing young Romanian women, often from deprived backgrounds, to travel to Northern Ireland with the false promise of employment in a commercial setting. The grim reality awaiting the victims was a world of prostitution and sexual exploitation.

His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Irish Office of the Revenue Commissioners continue to play a key role in targeting the individuals and organised crime gangs responsible for excise fraud in both

jurisdictions. Ongoing operations are being pursued on both sides of the border, specifically in relation to tobacco-, oil- and alcohol-related offences, with many successful outcomes recorded during the reporting period. One collaborative investigation resulted in the identification of a suspect consignment at Dublin Port in June 2023. The consignment was seized by Revenue Commissioners at an address in County Monaghan, resulting in the discovery of 10.4 million illicit cigarettes, worth approximately €8.2 million.

Organised immigration crime remains a cause for concern for all law enforcement agencies across the common travel area. That area is not devolved and is led by Home Office immigration enforcement and an Garda Síochána. Multi-agency collaboration continues to play a role in proactive and investigative responses, with strong emphasis being placed on sharing information and intelligence to disrupt organised crime gangs that are focused on exploiting vulnerabilities in that priority crime area. There were a number of operational successes during this reporting period, including the dismantling of organised crime gangs involved in the smuggling of migrants into the UK and Ireland. The joint agency task force is adding value and producing results through that continued collaboration. I am pleased to be able to report such positive results to my Assembly colleagues.

The IGA mechanism continues to deliver effective cooperation between our respective law enforcement agencies. I am committed to maintaining that excellent level of criminal justice cooperation with Ireland, which is in the best interest of our respective communities.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you, Minister, for that statement. I call Matthew O'Toole to ask the first question.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, thank you very much for that update. I hope that you will not take this the wrong way, but, when we question you in the Chamber, we spend a lot of time being told by you that certain types of policing and other enforcement activities are operational matters and are nothing to do with your Department. However, your statement today consists in large part of operational updates. Since, I presume, we are able to ask you about the contents of the statement, are we to understand that we will be able to ask you about operational policing matters relating to the PSNI and other agencies in the future? They form the vast bulk of the statement.

Mrs Long: No.

Ms Ferguson: I thank the Minister for her update on the five project advisory groups. We can see, from the Minister's statement, the positive impact that they are making on cooperation and criminal justice matters. In relation to the youth justice project advisory group, can the Minister provide any insight into or update on the work that is being undertaken by the North/South research hub on youth justice, Stable Lives Safer Streets?

Mrs Long: The idea behind that justice research hub is to provide background information on vulnerabilities that could lead young people into offending behaviour and how best those vulnerabilities can be avoided. That research continues, and, at the end of the project, it will feed into the work that we do, particularly our work on preventing offending amongst young people. It will not, however, be a matter for just the Departments of Justice in the North and South; it will be a matter for other Departments, because many of the interventions that prevent our young people from getting involved with the justice system come from outside the justice sector.

Mr Frew: We know that the public protection arrangements in Northern Ireland (PPANI) and the management of offenders moving between jurisdictions have always been of concern. There have been blind spots with regard to the management of offenders. Given that the Minister mentioned that there are now more formal arrangements between the jurisdictions and that those arrangements have been revised and signed off, can the Minister elaborate on the detail of that and assure the House that those blind spots will be removed?

Mrs Long: The Member will have to be more specific about which blind spots he is referring to, but I am happy to share a copy of the memorandum of understanding (MOU) with him, so that he has it to peruse at his leisure.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. Can you please outline how your Department engages with law enforcement colleagues in the South operationally and strategically?

Mrs Long: The main role of the IGA is to provide a strategic framework for operational partners to engage within. For example, I am answerable for the work that is done by Forensic Science Northern Ireland and others. We would be directly involved in trying to set out that strategic cooperation to ensure that,

where there is best practice and good learning, we benefit from it on a cross-jurisdictional basis.

At the operational level in Northern Ireland, oversight is provided by the Policing Board, so the operational matters that are referred to in this report for completeness are overseen by the Policing Board through regular reports from the JATF and, indeed, from the other organised crime task force in the PSNI.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister for such a detailed report. In responding, I declare my membership of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I welcome the positive update on the continuing cooperation between law enforcement agencies in both jurisdictions.

We have heard much recently about the murderous ramming of PSNI vehicles by lawbreakers trying to avoid capture. Was any indication given of a similar trend of such attacks on an Garda Síochána vehicles?

Mrs Long: That matter was not discussed as part of the IGA. The specific issues that we deal with through the IGA are circumscribed by the list of headings that I read out. We are aware, however, that that happens across these islands and is not unique to Northern Ireland, far from it, in fact. It is quite common and is, for example, more common in other parts of the UK.

Ms Ennis: My question is in a similar vein to Paul Frew's. Perhaps the Minister is in a position to give us further details on the formal arrangements between the Probation Service and the Probation Board, specifically in relation to the management of sex offenders.

Mrs Long: There is already considerable cross-border operational cooperation around the management of sex offenders. One of the most talked about loopholes is the ability of sex offenders to change their name. We are taking advice on that at the moment, including advice on how to include that in future legislation for the Assembly to consider, which would increase the notice periods and the monitoring periods that need to be given for someone who chooses to change their name and outlines which documents they can or cannot change their name on, for what purposes they can use a changed name and what the declaration and monitoring arrangements are.

All those issues are under active consideration, but they do not form part of the MOU, which is about operational-level cooperation.

11.30 am

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her update and for the ongoing important work. Addressing road deaths is another area where there is a need for cross-border, multi-agency cooperation. Does the Minister see that cooperation being taken forward in the initiative that she is involved in, and does she want to prioritise it within her ministerial remit?

Mrs Long: I would like to prioritise that and to start to reverse the numbers of road deaths within my remit. One of the issues in the sentencing Bill, which I hope to bring forward next year, will be to increase the penalties for some of those most serious road offences, particularly those that cause death and serious injury. That will go through the Committee processes.

There is cooperation on road traffic matters in the work of AGS and the PSNI more generally, particularly in monitoring and coordination. That was not discussed at the IGA meeting, because we were very much focused on the report of business from the previous strategy and on the agreement of the strategy going forward.

Mr Dickson: I thank you, Minister, for your statement and, particularly, for the good working relationship that you have with Minister McEntee. Will you outline how the Northern Ireland Prison Service cooperates and shares its good practice with the Irish Prison Service?

Mrs Long: The Prison Service has a long history of working with the Irish Prison Service. There has been quite a strong collaborative relationship. That was not reported on in this sitting of the IGA, but there has been joint learning on rehabilitation and on what is effective, particularly innovations in that and the work of the Probation Board where it reaches within the prison walls for rehabilitation and challenge. Those are all matters for joint consideration of options for collaboration and improvement.

Ms Á Murphy: I welcome the Minister's update, particularly where rural crime is concerned. Minister, can you provide some further detail on exactly what cooperation will continue on an all-island basis, specifically in tackling rural crime?

Mrs Long: There are a number of threads in rural crime, but the parts that we focused on in particular at this IGA were those that I referred to in the statement that were on a spate of cross-border burglaries that caused particular consternation in border communities. There

was a joint operation between the PSNI and AGS, which they reported on to the IGA and which I conveyed to you this morning.

There are other opportunities, however, and I know that both police forces have also done considerable preventative work in rural communities, particularly where agricultural vehicles and buildings are concerned, and to try to enhance cooperation at the border so that simply crossing the border is not a means of escaping the law.

Mr McMurray: I thank the Minister for the information that she provided. What is the structure of the joint agency task force, and how often does it meet?

Mrs Long: The joint agency task force was set up under Fresh Start, so it falls into a number of structures. Basically, the Office of the Revenue Commissioners, HMRC, PSNI, AGS and, where appropriate, the Home Office and Immigration Enforcement are involved in the joint agency task force's different work streams. The task force meets routinely twice a year, but it will often meet more frequently when it is particularly busy at an operational level so that it can ensure that it is able to address whatever challenges it is facing.

Mr McNulty: This Friday is the 50th anniversary of the Dublin/Monaghan car bombings, when four bombs went off indiscriminately and, within 90 minutes, 34 innocents were murdered. My heart goes out to the victims' families, who are still grieving to this day. Can you update us on discussions that you have had with your Southern counterpart about the Dublin/Monaghan bombings and suspected collusion with British security forces?

Mrs Long: First, I associate myself with the Member's remarks about those families who are still grieving, many years after those horrific incidents. Legacy issues do not form part of the IGA, the terms of which are set out clearly in a memorandum of understanding. As a party leader, I have regular conversations with the Irish Government outside that structure, but, today, I am here to report solely on the structures of the IGA.

Mr McReynolds: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she outline how the Probation Board for Northern Ireland cooperates and shares with the Irish Probation Service?

Mrs Long: The Irish Probation Service and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland can share information in a number of areas. We hope to

enhance that work further, particularly on public protection. Areas that are highlighted for priority in 2023-25 include cooperating on knowledge-sharing; collaborative engagement on topical, new and emerging issues in criminal justice; strengthening collaboration in the development of interventions to enhance public protection and address offending in agreed areas across agencies on a cross-border basis; and taking forward collaboration through initiatives with a focus on the border counties. There are a significant number of other recommendations that the Probation Board and, indeed, the wider public protection framework want to take forward in order to ensure that they are able to keep people safe and that the border is no impediment to the rule of law.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement. I particularly welcome the work of the criminal justice and social diversity project advisory group. What stage are we at on hate crime legislation compared with the South? What is the Minister doing to prioritise progress?

Mrs Long: Hate crime legislation in the South was temporarily paused and will, I believe, be restarted at some point. It has been paused for over a year since its introduction.

The Assembly was unable to bring forward hate crime legislation in the previous mandate due to time pressures. We face similar time pressures and finance pressures in this mandate, but it is a priority area for the Department's work. I am looking at two specific options for advancing hate crime legislation, and I want to consider them further. We settled on a model to do with statutory aggravators as the best way in which to deal with hate crime in Northern Ireland. In this mandate, there will be two opportunities when that may be advanced: one will be through the sentencing Bill and the other will be through the victims of crime Bill towards the end of the mandate. We are considering which is the best and most appropriate vehicle. The advantage of the sentencing Bill would be to bring things forward; the advantage of the victims Bill would be to contextualise hate crime in the provision for victims.

Mr Allister: Usually, the Minister hides behind the rubric of operational matters. Today, her refuge is the terms of reference of the MOU. However, she is the Justice Minister: in that capacity, in this forum or any other, has she raised with her counterpart the Dublin Government's attitude to the Omagh bomb inquiry, their refusal to have an inquiry or the inadequacy of their legislation, which was

illustrated by the Kingsmills inquest, during which it became clear that evidence was taken in secret and in the absence of victims' legal representatives? Has she ever raised those matters? If not, why not?

Mrs Long: First, I will correct the Member's assertion that I hide. I am standing here in plain sight, answering questions on matters that are my departmental responsibility. I am not here to answer questions on matters that pertain to me as leader of the Alliance Party. If we want to introduce an "Ask the Leaders" debate in the Assembly, I am up for that too, but that is a matter for the Procedures Committee and for the Speaker, not for me.

I am aware that I am the Justice Minister; that is one of the few accurate things that the Member said. On that basis, I am also well aware of my responsibilities. Today, I have set out clearly the issues on which I have engaged as part of the IGA process. The Member asked whether I had raised some of those issues more widely with the Irish Government, and if not, why not. I have raised some of the issues, albeit not necessarily in the terms that the Member raised them in the Chamber, but I have not raised them through the IGA because they do not pertain to my responsibilities in the IGA, which are the purpose of this statement.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): That concludes questions on the Minister's statement. I ask —

Mr McNulty: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is getting hot in here. It is a raging disgrace that the Minister of Justice had to fan herself whilst speaking. What is the craic with the thermostat? *[Laughter.]* Can we get some temperature control in here, please?

Mrs Long: Agreed. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I thank the Member for raising the issue. We will investigate that further.

As I said, that concludes questions on the statement.

Mr O'Toole: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Speaker's Office provide clarity? When I asked the Minister whether she was answering on operational matters, she said that she was not, but, with all due respect, the content of the statement included a long and significant update on operational matters. It would be helpful if the Speaker's Office could confirm whether it is in order for Ministers, effectively, to decline to answer on the content

of statements that they have just given to the Assembly.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I am happy — Members, Order — to refer the matter to the Speaker and the Speaker's Office for further advice.

Mrs Long: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The conventions for a Minister answering questions on the Justice Department are well established. When policing and justice were devolved — policing was first; justice was second — structures were set up to ensure that there was no inappropriate interference in police operational matters. I updated the House on a meeting that took place. Therefore, in the context of an update on the meeting, I updated Members on the updates that I had received at the meeting. I answered a straight question from the Member, which was: would I answer questions on those issues in the future?

Mr Buckley: That is not a point of order.

Mrs Long: It is not for you to judge. You, with all due respect, are not in the Chair. *[Interruption.]* It was previously ruled that the Justice Minister does not routinely answer questions on matters that have other oversight structures in the political sphere. Mr Speaker has made it clear. Clearly, some Members do not want to accept that ruling.

Mr Allister: It is so convenient.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Members —.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Mr Allister, can you give me a second, please?

Members, it is not proper business to continue conversations or make jibes when any Member, Minister or otherwise, is on their feet. I ask Members to take note of that. Mr Allister.

Mr Allister: Mr Deputy Speaker, in drawing —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Is this a point of order, Mr Allister?

Mr Allister: Yes. When drawing the matter to the attention of the Speaker, will you draw attention to the untenable proposition of the Justice Minister that she can come to the

House at her whim and talk about operational matters, but Members are not allowed to ask her about operational matters?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Members, Order. All matters raised, including the original point of order, will be referred to the Speaker's Office for advice. Thank you.

Members should take their ease before we move to the next item in the Order Paper.

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

Farm Support and Development Programme

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that he wishes to make a statement.

Mr Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make a statement to the Assembly on the farm support and development programme.

As the Balmoral show is opening tomorrow, I felt that it was important to update the Assembly on future farm support. At the outset, however, I want to express my thanks and gratitude to countless people in Northern Ireland's farming community for their warm welcome and the kindness offered to me to date.

I have experienced many great examples of good farming practices in Northern Ireland since taking up my role as Minister, examples that I am determined to profile and showcase. I am determined to grasp the opportunity provided to me as Minister to translate and communicate the great things happening across farming today to the general public in a clear and easily accessible manner, building resilience and looking on a strong and successful future ahead.

I do not come to the job with negativity, doom and gloom but with boundless positivity and a genuine, strong desire to work in partnership with others. As many of you will be aware, the farm support and development programme is a new programme that my Department has co-designed with stakeholder organisations to

target farm support to meet the bespoke needs of Northern Ireland.

The overall objective is to transition to a more sustainable farming sector by seeking to implement policies and strategies that benefit our climate and environment while, very importantly, supporting our economically and socially significant agri-food sector. It has been long in gestation, and, for many, the details that I outline today will come as no surprise. I thank officials for all the work done to date, especially when Ministers were not in post, to develop the relevant initiatives, packages and measures in close collaboration with stakeholders.

11.45 am

As Minister, my vision for the time ahead aligns closely with the farm support and development programme and is to ensure both economic and environmental sustainability. I am keen to see the initiatives, packages and measures delivered at pace and for our ambition to be strong. I want to secure sustainable productivity and assist the development of effective, functioning supply chains, ensuring food security and high standards of disease control and public and animal health. I also want to do more to recognise the importance of the food that we produce to every aspect of our well-being. Working in partnership, I will shortly bring forward a new Northern Ireland food strategy framework that will ensure that the policies that affect our food system are aligned and that we can contribute to achieving health, environmental, economic and societal goals.

As Minister, I am clear that we must also tackle the reality of climate change. We cannot ignore what we see in front of us, with the severe weather patterns experienced this year alone severely impacting some of our towns, villages, communities and businesses. We must act now. The impact of climate change is particularly acute for agriculture, with extreme weather, for example, having a prolonged effect. In early March this year, I attended the sixty-fourth George Scott Robertson lecture at Queen's University. The presentation by Dr Pete Falloon from the Met Office unveiled critical insights into the future trajectory of UK weather patterns: drier, hotter summers alongside milder, wetter winters, characterised by more intense rainfall events. Building long-term resilience and adaptation and achieving a genuinely just transition are absolutely key.

Achieving improved environmental sustainability is paramount. I want to move to address ammonia- and phosphorus-related

issues by incentivising and enabling actions that protect and enhance our natural and marine environment so that we can achieve better guardianship of water and air quality, soil health and biodiversity. An environmentally sustainable agri-food industry will also provide a key part of the jigsaw to secure the recovery of Lough Neagh and improve water quality across Northern Ireland.

I acknowledge that significant work has already been undertaken to chart the way forward. I thank officials and stakeholders for their commitment to working in partnership in the co-design of the farm support and development programme. The principles of co-design, partnership working and effective communication will be key as the programme is introduced in a phased manner in the months and years ahead.

By way of background, before I talk in a bit more detail about the future agricultural policy proposals, a consultation exercise on the policy proposals associated with the future agricultural policy framework was undertaken in December 2021, and the responses informed 54 policy decisions that were announced in the House in March 2022. Input from the agricultural policy stakeholder group, which was established in June 2021, has been essential to the development of the programme. The group brings together representatives from across the food, farming and environment sectors and ensures that their views are understood and properly considered during the development of the programme. This co-design approach provides an exemplary model for policy development that could be applied more generally across all Departments.

I especially thank the relevant stakeholders, including members of the Dairy Council for Northern Ireland; the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association (NIAPA); Northern Ireland Environment Link, which includes the National Trust, Nature Friendly Farming Network, the RSPB and Ulster Wildlife; the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA); the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association (NIMEA); the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU); the British Veterinary Association (BVA); and the Northern Ireland Grain Trade Association (NIGTA), for their commitment to work together as part of the stakeholder group, which I met recently. It has provided and continues to provide a key forum for discussion at each stage of the policy development process.

Before I move on to outline the elements of the farm support and development programme, I

want to first consider the significance of our agri-food sector. Northern Ireland has a unique farm family structure. Farm families work hard to produce quality food while working hand-in-hand with nature. I very much welcome the event organised by the Ulster Farmers' Union at the end of February celebrating the family farm. Since becoming AERA Minister, I have visited a range of farms, from a dairy farm and a horticulture farm in County Down and an arable farm in County Armagh to a sheep farm in County Derry/Londonderry. I have noted the massive respect that I have heard, on many occasions, for the work of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) in educating those coming into the sector and those managing our farm businesses. What farmers produce is literally life-giving, as it provides sustenance to millions of people, and life-affirming through the sector's value to communities, businesses, our environment and, indeed, the very social fabric of everyday life in Northern Ireland. I have put on the record, consistently, that we need to call time on the idea that the environment and agriculture are pitted against each other. That is wrong and does a real injustice to the many positive examples of great farming practice across Northern Ireland.

Since becoming Minister, I have had very positive engagement with, amongst others, the Ulster Farmers' Union and Northern Ireland Environment Link. At those meetings, I have stressed my desire that we work in partnership to deliver a more resilient and sustainable agri-food sector as custodians of the countryside. There are many great stories to be told of environmental action in practice, and I intend to continue to showcase them. Our farmers are also key to our future food security. Climate change, conflict and population rise will provide challenges to our food supplies, but I am focused on ensuring longer-term solutions to prevent crises and preserve our food security.

Funding for the programme comes largely from the Treasury's earmarked funding for agriculture, environment and rural support, which is guaranteed to the end of the current Parliament. Some £329 million has been allocated in this financial year. It is imperative that any future settlement reflects our policy objectives and ambitions and is an absolute minimum. I want to see significant growth in the funding awarded. The farm support and development programme is made up of a range of schemes and actions, which I will now outline. Some of them are already being seen as exemplars by my counterparts in the rest of the UK and Ireland. Before I go into detail, I will reference the concerns about the schemes

being overly complicated. I recognise those concerns and have asked that the simplification, accessibility and bureaucracy of the scheme be placed as a standing item on the agriculture policy stakeholder group's agenda. I have also asked that each scheme be tested against a set of criteria, which has been agreed following consultation with the group, to ensure that the initiatives, packages and measures are simple and easy to access.

As announced in March 2022, the new farm sustainability payment will provide a balance between providing a safety net that will help a farm business withstand shocks that are beyond its ability to manage effectively and encouraging farm businesses to be sustainable, efficient, competitive and able to manage risk proactively. My current planning assumption is that, from 2025, farm businesses will need to activate five entitlements on five hectares of eligible land to meet the requirements of the farm sustainability transition payment, and, from 2026, to meet the requirements of the payment going forward. With the introduction of the farm sustainability transition payment in 2025, current basic payment scheme entitlements will expire and be replaced with farm sustainability payment entitlements. The full farm sustainability payment is planned to go live in 2026. That will include changes to land eligibility, new farm sustainability standards and a new penalty regime. Those changes will be communicated well in advance. A number of conditionalities are planned, such as compliance with the new farm sustainability standards, participation in the soil nutrient health scheme, development of a nutrient management plan, the provision of specified genetic profiles — or DNA tagging — on-farm performance data of bovine animals and participation in the carbon footprinting project.

As previously announced, the beef sustainability package aims to help ensure the future viability of our beef sector by helping the sector to keep pace with its competitors, improve resilience and, importantly, reduce greenhouse gas and ammonia emissions. It comprises two elements that are aimed at improving farm productivity while at the same time reducing greenhouse gas and ammonia emissions. The beef carbon reduction scheme, which commenced on 1 January 2024, incentivises farm businesses to reduce the age at slaughter of clean beef cattle over a four-year phased implementation period. It is planned that the suckler cow scheme will go live in early 2025. It will incentivise farm businesses to reduce the age at first calving and/or the calving interval of beef bred suckler cows over a four-year phased implementation period. CAFRE is

providing training to help farm businesses understand the changes to management practices that are needed.

The environmental challenges that need to be tackled in Northern Ireland are substantial, and I know that. Through the farming with nature package, there is significant potential for farm businesses and land managers across all land types in Northern Ireland to make vital, positive contributions to tackling those environmental impacts head-on and to be properly recognised by society for doing so. The package will initially focus on halting and reversing the trends in nature decline through maintaining, restoring and creating habitats that are important for species diversity and improving connectivity between habitat areas. Work is ongoing to develop the package, including an orderly transition from the environmental farming scheme.

Environmental payments will, as far as possible, seek to recognise and reward the public goods provided. That approach aims to encourage the environment to be seen as another on-farm enterprise that has the potential to become a profit centre within an overall sustainable farming model. It will also assist farm businesses and land managers to make an economic return on the environmental assets that they create and manage appropriately. Although work on the farming with nature package is not as advanced as other schemes that I have mentioned, I have asked my officials to prioritise that area of work over the coming months.

From 2026, the existing cross-compliance requirements will be replaced by new farm sustainability standards that are focused on environmental, animal and human health, and animal welfare issues, where the incidence of non-compliance has either increased or has seen limited improvement in the past five years. The exact make-up of those new standards and the underpinning set of requirements are under development. Applicants to the farm sustainability payment scheme, beef sustainability package and the farming with nature package will need to comply with the new farm sustainability standards. The standards will have an associated penalty regime, which is also under development.

The soil nutrient health scheme is a groundbreaking policy intervention that is assisting farm businesses in planning their farm nutrient management more effectively, with the long-term aim of reducing agricultural impacts on water quality. The scheme represents an investment of up to £45 million in our farming

sector. Participating in the scheme provides farm businesses with important information to help manage soil nutrients and farm carbon. Crucially, participation in the soil nutrient health scheme will be a condition of the receipt of the new farm sustainability payment and the farming with nature package. It requires participants to register for the scheme and complete the training offered by CAFRE. The scheme is being rolled out zonally. Following receipt of their soil analysis results, farm businesses will be offered training by CAFRE to help them understand those results and develop a nutrient management plan. That plan will help farm businesses provide additional nutrients, such as nitrogen and phosphorus, to meet crop requirements. In so doing, it will significantly reduce run-off of nitrogen and phosphorus into our waterways. We can all agree that that is something that we want to achieve.

The ruminant genetics programme aims to drive improvements in productivity and environmental performance in the ruminant livestock sectors. The programme will be delivered by my Department in partnership with the agri-food industry. Genetic improvement will contribute significantly to achieving the target reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. The first phase of the programme will provide farm businesses with the data and evidence to make better-informed breeding decisions to advance genetic gain in dairy and feed animals. Training will also be provided by CAFRE to assist the industry to maximise the programme's benefits.

My Department is seeking to ensure that as many of the new policy interventions as possible help drive down the agriculture industry's carbon footprint. The farming for carbon project focuses on actions to reduce carbon emissions and, by association, other emissions from farms and on actions to offset carbon emissions through sequestration. The principle of encouraging farming for carbon as a business enterprise on-farm will also be developed.

My Department has collaborated with DEFRA to include a new Northern Ireland element in the DEFRA dairy demonstrator research project, which opened for applications in November 2023. Furthermore, the carbon footprinting project plans to commence in 2024.

Northern Ireland agriculture relies on an industry structure with an ever-increasing age profile of farmers. Well-educated farmers have been shown to be more open to adopting advanced technology and environmentally friendly practices. A reduction in the average

age of farmers, as well as accelerating the transition to those with relevant training and skills, would provide a workforce that is more open to innovation and change.

The farming for generations pilot scheme is planned to commence in autumn 2024 and will support farm businesses in planning for a timely and orderly transition to a new generation.

The pilot scheme will provide the farm family with the knowledge and skills to help with the transfer of the management and leadership responsibility.

12.00 noon

Plans are also progressing to launch new knowledge transfer schemes to replace the business development groups and the farm family key skills scheme, which have recently come to an end. They will build on the success of outgoing schemes, using proven methods to equip farmers to address today's challenges and develop their businesses in a sustainable way. CAFRE plans to introduce the schemes to farmers during 2024. A new, innovative package of training and support is also planned for agri-professionals that will be designed to help them better assist their farming clients through a period of change.

The Northern Ireland production horticulture sector makes an important contribution to the economy, the environment and human health. There is scope to develop the sector further. The horticulture schemes will aim to do that over the coming years. An increase in local horticulture productivity will help to improve overall agri-food sector productivity and sustainability, grow the economy and help to ensure the stability of the food supply chain by increasing local resourcing.

It is currently planned that the horticulture sector will have a bespoke range of schemes. The horticulture sector growth support scheme will aim to commence in autumn 2024, with the establishment of subsector growth groups, along with a growers' academy. An innovation support scheme will aim to commence in autumn 2025.

The capital investment scheme is planned to help farm businesses to improve their environmental performance and business efficiency. In particular, support will be focused on assisting the industry to meet net zero targets and reduce the environmental impact of farm sectors. That will be achieved by the adoption of precision technology and equipment

to reduce ammonia emissions, carbon emissions and nutrient loss.

The supply chain schemes aim to assist in improving collaboration between producers and growers in the supply chain, encouraging them to innovate, problem solve and add value beyond what they can achieve in isolation. A range of supply chain schemes will be launched during 2025 for new and existing groups to pursue opportunities for growth; to develop products, processes and systems; and to address longer-term strategic supply chain challenges affecting the agri-food sector.

In January 2023, the sheep industry task force produced its report to identify the needs of the sheep sector in Northern Ireland and a proposed package to encourage its development. I welcome that report. My officials are working to better understand the strategic needs of the sheep sector, and I will consider deploying levers to meet those needs. I intend to discuss that with my officials over the coming weeks.

The farm support and development programme is supported by a full programme of communications to ensure that farm businesses are well informed of and prepared for the challenges ahead.

The purpose of the statement is to provide an overview of the farm support and development programme. Participation in that programme is voluntary, and there is no market or policy penalty for non-participation. It is clear that there are challenges ahead for us all. There is something in the farm support and development programme for every farm business to help to ensure that, together, we transition to a more sustainable farming sector.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call Patsy McGlone, I advise Members that, hopefully, the Chamber will be a bit cooler. The temperature was quite high, so Building Services, along with the top Table here, has tried to get it regulated. Hopefully, you will feel the difference.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. *[Translation: I thank the Minister.]* Minister, you are probably setting yourself up for an ambush at the Balmoral show, given that your statement contained so many more questions than answers. I will pick out the issue of the sustainability payment. Will you add some flesh to the bones of the fine principles of managing effectively and encouraging farm businesses to be sustainable, efficient and competitive and to manage risk proactively? How will that be done,

and how will it be communicated to the farming and agricultural communities? That is a pretty big deficit at the moment.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. Climate change is, obviously, an issue in the Chamber as well today.

The detail is important. I am genuinely committed to the process of co-design, which is how this has been successfully developed thus far. There is a need to find a way forward so that we have resilience in the sector. That has been a key concern for a number of farm businesses, given the weather issues over the past number of months. The farm sustainability payment is about building resilience and ensuring that we are able to equip them.

I understand that we need to have a safety net for businesses. I am also conscious that, given the funding that we have, business cases must satisfy in terms of value for money. It is about striking a balance and recognising the need for resilience for food security but also allowing them to move forward successfully.

Let us be clear: I am very hopeful about the sector. I look forward to the Balmoral show this week. There are challenges, but I think that, collectively, we all want to put our shoulder to the wheel and to see whether we can find a way forward to address those challenges. I came in as a Minister focused on solutions, and that is what I will do over the time ahead.

Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I thank the Minister for his statement. As Mr McGlone said, there are more questions than answers. It covers a huge range and is a big project to look at. I declare an interest as an active farmer who may or may not have an interest in applying for some of the schemes, depending on how complex they are.

I have a couple of issues to raise, with your indulgence. One is around the stakeholder group that is co-designing the projects. I have had significant complaints from some of those stakeholders about feedback.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Come to your question, Mr Elliott.

Mr Elliott: They are questioning whether it is actually co-design or just the Department using them to pay lip service to that. I would like the Minister's comments on that.

Secondly, if you will indulge me —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: If you very quickly come to your question.

Mr Elliott: Some of the schemes may suit farmers who are more intensive than extensive.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. There are a number of aspects to it. I addressed the matter of complexity in my statement. It is important that, when we go forward, we check everything around the complexity and the ability to ensure that it is simple and easy to access. I have asked, as part of today's statement, for that to be considered going forward.

If there are concerns from the stakeholder group, I am happy to talk to the Member outside the Chamber, and we can talk through some of those concerns.

There is a lot of detail in relation to this, and we need to work up how each individual scheme will operate. It is important that we do that. Over the time ahead, there will be much more detail on it. I felt that it was important that I came to the Chamber today to outline the statement and take questions from Members. The easier thing to do would have been to issue a written ministerial statement on Thursday at the Balmoral show, but I felt that it was important to come here, because one of the benefits of devolution is having Ministers in post who are accountable to the Assembly. I am also happy to come to the Committee, if necessary, to go through more on the issue.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome it, particularly his comments that we need to call time on pitting agriculture and the environment against each other. I really welcome that. There are so many questions that I could ask, but I will try to narrow it.

Minister, tomorrow is the deadline for the single farm payment application for farmers — 15 May is cast in stone. Farmers are asking this: when they move to the new scheme, will their current entitlements carry over to the new scheme, and will they be of the same value?

Secondly, last year, when I was Chair of the Committee, I commissioned a report on the under-representation of the role of women in agriculture: 95% of main farm businesses are male-owned, and 96% of businesses in the development groups are male-owned.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Come to your question, please.

Mr McAleer: Will the Minister include looking at the under-representation of women in his new policy?

Mr Muir: Everyone is being creative with their questions. Sometimes, there are three or four in one. The Principal Deputy Speaker is showing amazing patience.

I will start with the role of women in agriculture. The legacy report that the Committee produced in the last mandate was increasingly useful. I followed up on it on my recent visit to Brussels to see what they are doing across Europe on the issue. It is something that I want to look at for this but also with regard to a rural development policy. We need to refresh our rural development policy to reflect the realities of today. I see significant issues with the role of women in rural communities that we need to address, particularly, for example, childcare. We need to work at that.

On the deadline for the single farm payment, the carry-across and details around that, I am happy to have a meeting afterwards with one of my officials. I will get clarification to the Member on that, hopefully, today or tomorrow.

The first element of the question was about pitting agriculture and the environment against each other: it is a false narrative. We cannot have economically sustainable farming that is not environmentally sustainable, and I am clear about that. I do not intend to feed into that narrative, because it is absolutely false and is based on the wrong premise. I have a clear vision for the future of the farming community in Northern Ireland. It is a positive vision. I know that there are challenges, but, if we work together, we can overcome those challenges and deliver a secure future for people. I am conscious that we are talking about people's livelihoods. It is a generational thing: families are invested in their farming enterprise. I want to support those businesses so that, in the time ahead, we can provide them with security and can all have something that we can be proud of in Northern Ireland.

Mr T Buchanan: Minister, your statement indicates an increase from 3 hectares to 5 hectares in the area of land that will be required to be eligible for the farm sustainability transition payment from 2025. That will, no doubt, knock out a number of small farm holdings that will not qualify for the new payment. What assessment has been made of the difficulties that that may present for small farm businesses? What assistance will be available to them, and how many will the new scheme affect?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. I am conscious of the issues that he has raised about small farm businesses and how we support them. I will write to the Member with the details of the evaluation that was done. We have to be clear about this: we have to have a scheme that is fit for purpose and meets the business case requirements of Treasury and the Department of Finance. That is what I have to do. I also want to see whether there is a way — I have engaged with the Finance Minister on this and will continue to do so — of looking at funding through a different lens. Currently, we look at it just through the lens of pounds, shillings and pence, but we need to look at the benefits that it gives. I am also doing that.

I will write to the Member on the details of the issue that he raised. It is valuable that he raised it.

Ms Egan: I was recently interviewed for a school project by a teenager called Alicia, who is from Millisle in our constituency. The interview was about pollution and environmental sustainability, but she is also a keen member of the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster. Young people get that we cannot pit environment and agriculture against each other. Minister, what are you doing to get more young people involved in farming?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her question. I want to get lots more young people involved in farming. It is a challenge — it is the challenge, if you will pardon the pun, of our generation — to get younger people involved. It is important that the message that we and I, as the Minister, send from here is a positive one on the future for agriculture and farming in Northern Ireland. If we are to get young people involved, a negative message will not attract them, so we need to set up a positive vision for the future. I am determined to do that day after day.

The young farmers' payment scheme provides an annual top-up of the basic payment scheme for farmers who meet the eligibility requirements. The scheme is open for applications, and the last year to apply for it is 2025. The new farm support and development programme has a farming for the generations programme to encourage longer-term planning for farm businesses. A farming for the generations pilot scheme, which is planned to commence in autumn 2024, will support farm businesses in planning for a timely and orderly transition to a new generation. The future of the current farmers' payment will be considered in the context of the farming for the generations programme.

Let us be clear: the future for farming is positive. Let us, all together, encourage more younger people to participate.

Ms Á Murphy: I thank the Minister for his statement. I note that he will bring forward a new food strategy framework sooner rather than later, hopefully. Minister, will you outline how the draft food strategy will align with future agriculture policy?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her question. Yes, the food strategy framework is very much in final draft form, and I hope to bring it to the Executive soon. It will align closely with the programme. There are other issues in it that we need to address, such as food poverty. It is a shame that people in our country experience food poverty, and the food strategy framework will relate to that. I am very much looking forward to launching it. It is a cross-cutting strategy, which is why it needs to go to the Executive. In the time ahead, hopefully, we can show, through the interventions that the Executive and I make, that we are making a positive difference to people's lives in Northern Ireland.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his statement. Maybe the temptation in the Department to release it at the Balmoral show was high, but I appreciate his coming to the House with it.

The new ammonia thresholds pose a real difficulty for our world-leading poultry and wider farming industry. Replacement buildings are assessed in the same way as a new building; therefore, even if the farmer proposes a new livestock shed, poultry house or slurry store that is more efficient and could reduce emissions, under this policy —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Is there a question?

Mr Buckley: — it could still be refused. Does the Minister agree that that approach is folly and counterproductive, and will he move to address it?

12.15 pm

Mr Muir: I will set out a bit of background on the issue around ammonia. The Office for Environmental Protection, which was discussed yesterday during the debate on environmental governance, took, in the absence of Ministers, what was essentially a judicial review against my Department with regard to ammonia. The permanent secretary at the time responded to

that within the powers available to her, and I fully support her response and actions around that. In Northern Ireland, we need to safeguard our environment, and we need to ensure that, going forward, our environment is sustainable. That is why we are in the situation that we are now in.

To deal with ammonia, I want to chart a course forward that protects our environment but allows our farm businesses to operate sustainably. The draft ammonia strategy, which proposes measures to reduce ammonia emissions, underwent public consultation from 4 January to 3 March 2023 and attracted a high level of interest across all stakeholder groups. Responses to the consultation are being used to inform a reworked draft ammonia strategy. Additional scientific modelling, statistical analysis and supply chain consideration is being undertaken to optimise design of the key proposed mandatory measures on the use of low-emission slurry-spreading equipment. A high-level report and a draft summary report on the responses to the consultation on the draft ammonia strategy have been published. A reworked strategy will be developed by autumn this year.

I am keen to see that we get movement on this, but we need to make sure that whatever we do is science-led and evidence-led, and that is what I am guided by in my role as Minister. I get the concerns about the issue, Mr Buckley — *[Interruption.]* I am giving you an answer — but I cannot subvert process or ignore the science and evidence around the issues.

Mr McReynolds: Will the Minister detail the practical benefits of the soil nutrient health scheme?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. I will give you a practical example of that. When I was doing farm visits on Friday in the upper Bann catchment area with the Rivers Trust and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), I saw clearly what the benefits are. The farmer had participated in the scheme. He had the information presented on maps that he had available on a computer and had printed off. He was able to identify the areas where there were issues with water gathering and how we manage that but also where to grow crops and how to manage the farm more effectively. That was allowing the business to be more productive while managing water quality in our riverways, and that catchment area leads into Lough Neagh. There is a practical benefit where data, knowledge and evidence are power to allow us to make the change. My colleagues across the rest of the UK and Ireland have been

speaking to me about the scheme and saying that they see it as a model that can be rolled out in areas in their jurisdiction. That is one of many examples of stuff that has been going on. Hopefully, we can pull together and profile much more across Northern Ireland.

Mr Irwin: My colleague Mr Buckley raised concerns about planning applications. It is a major issue on the ground. We have had planning applications in for two to three years and there is still no response. Farming needs to be able to compete in the modern world. We produce food. It is our main industry in Northern Ireland. This situation cannot go on, and the Minister needs to address it. I do not think that he answered Mr Buckley's question.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister, I did not detect a question, but you are free to respond.

Mr Muir: You are OK.

I am trying to address that issue, but it is important that I am guided by the science and evidence. It is important that the industry is successful, but it is also important that it is sustainable. Producers and consumers look to the product to make sure that it is made in a manner that safeguards our environment, and I am very aware of that. We cannot, on one hand, debate motions time after time in this place about the environment and Lough Neagh but, on the other hand, say, "Cast aside the evidence and science and just rock on". We cannot do that. We have to be guided by the evidence and science and find a sustainable way forward. I am committed to engaging with relevant stakeholders on the issue, but I am also prepared to make sure that I do things correctly, and that is what I have committed to do as Minister. I am not short-circuiting processes or the evidence and science that is presented to me, because, if I do that, the first thing that will happen is that I will end up in court.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is a good statement. I do not profess to be an expert in all things agriculture, but I am the mental health spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party. Since 2016, in any debate that we have had in the Chamber on mental health and well-being, farmers and their families have been mentioned as being well up the list of those who are suffering. I know that the Minister supports those families and has warmth and affection for them. Will the Minister outline whether there is a template in the programme and policy changes that looks at

the impact on the mental health and well-being of farmers and their families? How will they will be assisted when those things are rolled out?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. Thus far, I have not talked about that, and it is an important opportunity to outline my views. It particularly relates to our future rural development policy and how we support rural communities. It is also mainstreamed to ensure that staff and advisers who engage in the time ahead are properly trained for their engagement with the farming community.

In my time as Minister, I have seen a really committed community. I have seen many examples of good practice, but I also see examples of loneliness. I see examples of tough things happening on farms, and farmers often deal with those on their own or with just their husband or wife, which can be difficult. There are personal stories that I will not outline here today, but their challenges will remain with me for the rest of my life. I do this job because I want to change the situation. I want to give people the assurance that we have their backs, we want to support them, and we want to have a sustainable way forward.

Mental health is a key motivator for doing that. That is why I am conscious of the words that I say and the interventions that I make. We need to be conscious that we support people and are aware of the challenges that they face. It will be a key issue for me over the time ahead, particularly the training for staff but also seeing how we can talk about the current issues in our rural community.

Mental health is one massive issue. Perhaps we have not talked about it as much as we should, particularly among men. We need to break that taboo and have rational conversations around it. It would be good to work in partnership with organisations such as the Ulster Farmers' Union to see how we can chart our course forward.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his statement and look forward to meeting him later this week at the Balmoral show. I also welcome the statement in advance of the Balmoral show. It is an opportunity for Members to debate the issues here today.

Minister, a lot of your statement was about building resilience. Will you tell the Assembly and the wider farming, agriculture and environmental community how you plan to build that resilience?

Mr Muir: Resilience is at the absolute core of what I have announced here today. We need to be clear that we have a strong, sustainable future ahead. That is not just in respect of government funding and policy. If you have a farm, you have a farm business, so you will potentially look to banks to borrow money, and the first thing that banks will see is whether you have resilience and long-term viability. That is something that I want to do. We need to have a scheme that allows farmers to withstand the shocks that come along. We also need to find ways that we can diversify and change. I have seen many good practices across Northern Ireland where farms that were once doing a different type of practice have changed in order to be resilient. That has allowed them to have security for the way ahead.

Resilience totally underpins everything that I do. There are many examples of good practice around that, but we need to mainstream that good practice and find a way that we can communicate better to make farmers more aware of the practices that are required to give that resilience and long-term sustainability.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is 93 paragraphs of a superabundance of areas of operational responsibility. You never duck any questions that are asked on statements or at Question Time, which is welcome. In paragraph 20, you reference improving water quality across Northern Ireland. Will you enable your officials in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) to work with me and the Loughinisland anglers to divert a Northern Ireland Water outflow pipe from a sewage plant? It runs into the lake and is potentially impacting on the fish stock. Can the NIEA help us with that?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. I answer questions because they are within my operational responsibility, but there are other areas that are not, and you would not expect me to answer those. I am aware of the issue that you outlined and have received press cuttings about it. Primarily, it is a Northern Ireland Water matter. If the Member writes to me, I will see what role the Environment Agency has in it.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for his statement. I particularly welcome the greater focus on good environmental farm practice. In that context, how does today's announcement relate to actions required around making improvements to Lough Neagh?

Mr Muir: As regards the situation at Lough Neagh, which we debated yesterday, we are aware that a significant proportion, though not all, of the issues — approximately 60% — are due to agricultural run-off. We need to find a way forward to ensure that there is better water quality. Let us be clear: the issues of water quality are not confined to Lough Neagh. What I have outlined today is a way forward through education, engagement and conditionality with regard to support and cross-compliance penalties to ensure that we encourage farm businesses to move towards more sustainable practices that ensure that our waterways are more sustainable. That is absolutely key. I know that many farmers already do that, but we need to bring others on the journey.

Mr McNulty: Talking of silos, as somebody from a farming background, it has been a few years since I stood on top of the silage pit, rolled back the polythene, threw the tyres back and graped silage down behind the feeding barrier into the link box.

With regard to your silo approach, you mentioned the importance of the food that we produce every day —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member must come to a question.

Mr McNulty: — for every aspect of our well-being. How have you worked with other Departments to ensure that that is inculcated through Education, Health, Economy and, obviously, through your Department while avoiding a silo approach?

Mr Muir: I am avoiding a silo approach. As I have outlined to the Member previously, the food strategy framework is a key aspect of that. It is an overarching, cross-cutting strategy. It is in its final form, and I will bring it to the Executive for approval in the short time ahead. It is key that we do that and understand the benefits around it. I am engaged with ministerial colleagues on those issues because the agriculture, farming, food and fisheries industries that I am talking about and that we have discussed in the Chamber are a key part of the economy. We also need to understand the benefit of that and work together on the issues. I know the challenges that are there, particularly with regard to migration. We also know the issues that have been raised with me time and time again around that. That is why I want to work in partnership, not just with my Executive colleagues but with the UK Government on the actions that they need to take.

Mr Allister: In paragraph 45, we see platitudes about seeking simplification, but are the rest of those paragraphs not a chronicle of bureaucracy? I read about a number of conditionalities, new sustainability standards, compliance with multiple schemes and plans, farming for carbon and other qualifying hurdles. Are you not, in all of those schemes, still in the business of trussing up farming in more red tape? Is there no desire to cut, rather than increase, red tape?

Mr Muir: I outlined my desire to address those concerns. What I see daily are farm businesses that are already engaging with an awful lot of the stuff that I have outlined. They are engaging in those schemes and do not see an issue, because they understand the importance of productivity and of long-term sustainability for their businesses. What I am talking about is occurring across the rest of the UK and the rest of Europe. It is not surprisingly new; it is stuff that is already going on. I am committed to keeping an eye on the situation and making sure that we have simple and accessible schemes. That is important.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Minister for his statement. There are great farms in my constituency of East Londonderry, many of which are trying to diversify their farming businesses. However, one of the biggest challenges to that is planning, as mentioned by other Members. For example, Chestnutt Farm in Portrush — take the opportunity to visit it if you have not — has a milk vending machine and other farm shop type arrangements, but it is coming up against challenges with planning. How are you working with your planning colleagues in councils and the Communities Minister to address those issues?

Mr Muir: Planning in Northern Ireland is a key issue. It sits primarily with the Minister for Infrastructure. Last week, we talked about planning with regard to climate action and the need to ensure that we can progress planning applications for renewables. I am keen to explore that with the Minister because, ultimately, the responsibility for that lies with him. We also need to ensure that planning is sustainable. That is one of the issues that we need to address with regard to Lough Neagh, because we need to ensure that planning policy protects water quality in Northern Ireland.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement from the Agriculture Minister. Members may take their ease while we change the Top Table.

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

12.30 pm

Rent and Housing Initiatives: Financial Transactions Capital

Ms Armstrong: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can the House be given a further 15 minutes to examine the statement from the Minister for Communities, given that it arrived into our inboxes at 12.19 pm?

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I take this opportunity to apologise to the House for the delay in getting the statement to Members. Members will be aware that we are running about two or three hours ahead of schedule, with lunch and Question Time. I was not expecting to come to the House this soon, and I got the statement out as soon as I could. From my point of view, I have no issue if Members want to take extra time, but that is for the Chair to decide.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two. We are seeking some advice on this, and we will come back to you as soon as possible.

The House took its ease from 12.32 pm to 12.33 pm.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Members, noting the request for a suspension, I am minded to move ahead with the statement on the basis that the Minister has apologised and has given the very rational explanation that this business has moved forward on our schedule, which is not unusual or unique in any way. Therefore, I am minded to allow the Minister to proceed with the statement. Minister.

Mr Lyons: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. At the most recent election, my colleagues and I on these Benches stood on a platform to help working families. One of the most pressing issues facing those families right across Northern Ireland right now is the affordability and availability of quality housing. This is not an issue that will be solved quickly or by any one Department or by any one intervention, but it will require consistent and collaborative action on multiple fronts. Make no mistake about it: if we do not use all the levers available to us, we risk doing what we have always done and will end up getting the same results. Without change, we will continue to struggle to match the high levels of housing need with proper

supply. I am therefore determined to do more with what is available. Otherwise, thousands of households will continue to struggle to find a safe, secure and affordable home.

To that end, I have come to the Assembly today to announce my intention to launch a competition to make available a substantial sum of money that will support the delivery of a new supply of affordable intermediate-rent homes via financial transactions capital (FTC). It is a new form of affordable housing product, and it is being introduced in Northern Ireland for the first time. It is a first step for Northern Ireland's housing sector in moving beyond the established tenures of social rental, private rental and homeownership.

Intermediate rent sits between social rentals and private rentals in cost. It offers high-quality homes, with better security and access to support services. Tenants will receive a discount of at least 20% on their rent compared with local open-market rents, and they can remain in their intermediate-rent home for longer than is the norm in the private sector. They will also receive more proactive support from their landlord when they need it, and their home must meet a high-quality standard.

Typically, those who can benefit most from an intermediate-rent home are those lower-income households that are spending more than 30% of their income on housing costs. Research has indicated that, with over 28,000 households here spending more than 30% of their income on rental costs, there is certainly space in the market for a product that can offer a more affordable solution for lower-income households.

The Northern Ireland intermediate-rent policy and the dwelling design standards documents were published just over a year ago. My officials have been working since then to develop a funding scheme that can help breathe life into the policy. I therefore announce that, from tomorrow, 15 May 2024, a competition for funding will launch that will see a significant award of FTC loan funding to an intermediate-rent operator. The operator will initially develop 300 homes where they are needed and manage the process of renting them to eligible lower- to moderate-income people and families. That will help increase the supply of housing generally and the supply of affordable housing for rent specifically.

People need housing solutions that they know that they can rely on over time, so we are asking the intermediate-rent operator to offer the homes for at least 25 years. That long-term

commitment will help intermediate-rent tenants to establish themselves in communities where they work or learn and where their children attend school. Schemes such as intermediate rent allow us to deliver even more affordable housing by leveraging private finance and using novel government funding sources.

Intermediate rent will complement existing affordable housing options, including social housing.

We all recognise what we need to do now. Housing demand has, for too long, outpaced housing supply. We need to focus our capital spending on delivering those much-needed social homes right across Northern Ireland, but we also need to do something for those hard-pressed people and families who cannot get or do not want a social home, and we are doing that by offering them safe, secure and affordable alternatives. The approach also serves to protect my Department's capital budget, avoiding competition with the social housing development programme. That ensures that we can deliver the social homes that we need while offering alternative affordable housing options.

Homeownership is an aspiration that is shared by many people here, but rising house prices and mortgage costs, as well as, given the high rents in the private sector, the difficulty of saving for a deposit, mean that, for a growing number, it is becoming more and more difficult. I am committed to helping those who need a bit of extra support in order to afford their own home to do so.

Intermediate rent could be a real game changer for hard-working families whose needs are simply not met by what is currently on offer. My officials will continue to look for new ways in which novel funding sources, like FTC, can be used to expand housing delivery meaningfully.

The competition to award funding to the operator will launch tomorrow and close to applications on 23 August 2024. I expect that, once the intermediate-rent operator is in place, we could see the first intermediate-rent homes being available to rent as early as 2026. I look forward to announcing the outcome of the competition for funding before the end of the year.

The issue of housing will not fix itself, and, in light of an extremely tight budget environment, we must be prepared to do things differently and be radical in our approach. The pilot has the potential to pave the way for a new and sustainable supply of quality housing that is so

desperately required for our citizens in Northern Ireland. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Minister, thank you for the statement. For the first question, I call Daniel McCrossan.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for the statement, although we were given very short notice to consider it. The statement is positive, but the question is whether it goes far enough. Minister, the housing crisis in the North is worsening by the year. You have acknowledged that in statements and at Committee recently. What can you do to ensure that the initiative goes much further than developing homes for 300 families by 2026, because the issue is worsening each and every day?

Mr Lyons: I fully accept that it is a very difficult and complex issue for people. As I said in my statement, intermediate rent homes are one tool that we can use, but we have to address the issue on multiple fronts. This is a pilot programme. It is right and responsible that we test the initiative and see how it goes so that we make sure it works for people in Northern Ireland. It is, however, novel to here. I want to try it, and I believe that it will be successful, which will allow us to go further. It not only addresses the lack of affordable homes for people in Northern Ireland but takes the pressure off the system more widely for social housing and the private rented sector. It will help us utilise FTC, which we often hear is underutilised. All in all, this is a good announcement.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I thank the Minister for his statement. I look forward to going through it in further detail. Minister, given that the intermediate-rent homes do not provide lifelong tenancies and have a minimum period of 10 years' occupancy, can you confirm whether people will be entitled to remain for longer periods?

Mr Lyons: I said that, in Northern Ireland, we are looking at not 10 years but 25 years. That is much longer than the Member thought. The initiative is to help solve a problem for some people, particularly those who may be trying to get on the housing ladder but are unable to save for a deposit because of rent. In some cases, the reduction in rent, compared with that in private rented market, will hopefully give them the opportunity — those who want to — to get a deposit and purchase their own home.

Mr Brett: I thank the Minister for his statement and his clear focus on trying to meet the housing demand since being appointed. Does he agree that he could go further by looking at allowing the Housing Executive to be able to borrow once again, so that it can return to building its own homes, given that it is best placed to do so? Does the Minister further agree that the demolition of current Housing Executive stock, in which people want to remain, only adds to the current housing crisis?

Mr Lyons: I am always happy to agree with Mr Brett. It is absolutely right for us to seek to ensure the best use of the properties that we currently have. Part of that will be addressed in the housing supply strategy that I intend to bring forward. The Member is also right to highlight the importance of the Housing Executive being in a position to build homes again. We need more social housing in Northern Ireland and for housing associations to continue the work that they are doing. We also need the Housing Executive to be in a position in which it can borrow against its assets and build more homes and, importantly, refurbish its existing stock. I do not want to see more Housing Executive homes getting to such a state of disrepair that people cannot live in them. That is why it is important that the rules are changed. Work is going on with Executive colleagues and the Treasury to get us to that point.

Ms Armstrong: Minister, thank you for your statement. I am sad to say that I saw it only a minute before you got to your feet.

On page 3, it says:

"The Operator will initially develop 300 new homes where they are needed",

and that those will be for:

"eligible lower to moderate income people and families."

With over 10,000 people being homeless at the moment, how does that fit in with housing allocation points? Will this intermediate rent just ignore that allocation?

12.45 pm

Mr Lyons: This is different from allocation of social homes and fills a different gap in the market. It will help, however, by taking additional pressure off people who might otherwise be trying to get homes. Social homes will be taken away from that list, so it will relieve

pressure, and, of course, there will be different criteria. That will be put in place so that it can go to those who need it most. The operator will look at the areas of highest rent, the areas where the need is greatest and the areas with the people who can benefit most. Over 28,000 households are paying out over 30% of their income for rent. Those are the families that we are trying to help.

Ms Ferguson: I thank the Minister. The intermediate-rent model and the 300 new homes are welcome. The Minister mentioned need. Can he outline the potential locations of the additional homes, given the fact that the likes of Foyle — my constituency — and Belfast have the highest level of housing need? How will they be prioritised? Secondly, will these homes include the option to purchase the property under the right-to-buy scheme?

Mr Lyons: To the Member's last question, no, this will not be subject to the right-to-buy scheme, because a private operator will be coming in and using FTC. Once the 25-year period is over, it will be up to the operator to decide what it is doing with its properties, but that will not be in the time period within which the arrangement has been made.

Intermediate-rent homes can be delivered in any location across Northern Ireland, but I believe that they will be particularly effective in areas of high rental cost and high demand. The operator will agree the delivery locations with my officials. They will be based on identified need, prevailing market conditions and viability. The competition will also mandate provision in at least two local government districts, in the first phase.

Mr Brooks: I commend the Minister on his statement, which addresses an ever-growing need within our communities. Can he give any further detail about who is eligible and what the exact criteria are?

Mr Lyons: The households that can benefit from an intermediate-rent tenancy include those that are not yet ready for or are struggling to save towards home ownership; those who are living in the private rented sector but are struggling to pay their rent; and those with lower points who are waiting to rent a social home and who may benefit from a more affordable alternative to private renting while they wait for an allocation. As I said, those who spend more than 30% of their income on housing costs will be prioritised. Those are the parameters within which we intend to operate, but they will be subject to discussions as we move forward.

Mr Tennyson: I thank the Minister for his statement. What assurances can he give around the quality of the homes that will be brought forward for intermediate rent? For example, can he give us assurances that the homes will not require an expensive retrofit at a future date?

Mr Lyons: One of the key points about the intermediate-rent model is that the homes are not just at but above minimum standards. It is important that that is the case. We know what a difference a good home can make to people as they start out in life. For children and young people, having a good quality home — not just the fact that they have a home, but that they have a good quality home — makes all the difference to their education and health outcomes. It will be a requirement that the homes meet the minimum standards, but we want them to go beyond those standards.

Ms Forsythe: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is excellent to see him continuing to deliver on his commitment to help working families in Northern Ireland. Has this model of housing been tested before? Do the Minister know how it will work here?

Mr Lyons: Yes, this model has been tested elsewhere. It has been utilised in GB for over a decade. It has worked and has been successful, and that is why we are bringing it in here. I believe that we will have similar success, but it will still be prudent to take the pilot approach in order to make sure that it works in our market and for our needs and demands here. I look forward to its being as successful as it has been elsewhere so that we can expand and grow and, hopefully, contribute to dealing with the housing crisis that we find ourselves in. I emphasise again to Members that this is one tool, and we have to fight this battle on all fronts.

Mr Dickson: Following the last comment, Minister, in which you said that this is just one tool in the toolbox for delivery, what plans do you have to look at other things like self-build, co-ownership and, as you mentioned, the key role that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has and should have in delivering homes for people in Northern Ireland?

Mr Lyons: Absolutely. Those are all important tools for dealing with the housing crisis that we find ourselves in. FTC will be used here, and it is used in the co-ownership model, and I am pleased that I have been able to increase the co-ownership limit since I came into office. It is absolutely the case that we will need to fight

this battle on all fronts and not just in one Department. It will require a genuinely cross-departmental, collaborative approach.

I need to work with colleagues in the Department of Finance to make sure that I have the funding for the social development housing programme. I need to work with the Department for Infrastructure, and it needs to deliver to make sure that we have the waste water capacity and the right planning laws in place so that we can build homes in Northern Ireland more easily than we have done in the past. We need to make sure that planning law matches up to where it needs to be. We need to have collaboration with councils on development plans and to make sure that we have enough land. We need to make sure that we can build more social housing, more for the private rented sector and more for homeowners to buy. This is another tool in our toolbox, and I am delighted to bring it forward today.

Mr Kingston: I thank the Minister for his statement. Just last week, those of us who are members of the Communities Committee were discussing the need to explore new models that will deliver much-needed homes. I welcome the Minister's announcement for a new supply of affordable, intermediate-rent homes via financial transactions capital. Does he think that there will be scope to go beyond the initial 300 homes, given the housing pressures?

Mr Lyons: The Member is right to raise the importance of the issue. It is absolutely the case that I want to be in a position to be able to go further forward than the 300 intermediate-rent homes that I outlined today. It will be prudent to test the concept beforehand, but we will have an evaluation of the scheme, which will determine whether it can go forward in future — I believe that it can — and, importantly, the best way for it to go forward, with learning from what has taken place before.

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Minister for this really positive statement and for putting working families at the heart of his decision-making. He will know that I am very keen to see the housing estate and options improved in rural areas, such as in my constituency of Fermanagh and West Tyrone. Can he indicate how the initiative will help in rural areas in particular?

Mr Lyons: I am grateful to the Member for her question. She frequently raises with me the need to deal with social housing in rural areas. In fact, only yesterday, she was speaking to me about it. As we all know, Fermanagh and South Tyrone is a very rural constituency and is the

most westerly constituency, I believe, in the United Kingdom, as the Member likes to tell me. That means that it should not be left out. Rural areas are facing housing need. All too often, the perception can wrongly be that housing is an urban problem. It is not, and there are huge demands in rural areas as well. I am committed to maintaining the viability of those rural areas through the social housing programme.

We have set up a rural housing steering group, which has been established to explore the barriers to rural housing development and to develop a plan to address those barriers. Research has been commissioned, which is expected to report in the coming months, and I will be happy to share that with the Member in due course.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for his statement. This is a step in the right direction, but, in the past five years, over 2,040 Housing Executive homes have been sold off via the right-to-buy scheme. I welcome the fact that there will be 300 new homes in the initial development that was announced today, but what is the Minister's assessment of the right-to-buy scheme, its impact on homelessness and the lack of available housing for people who struggle to afford rent in Northern Ireland?

Mr Lyons: The Member is right to highlight the lack of social homes in Northern Ireland. I support people's right to buy their own home. Those homes are not wasted; they go to people who need somewhere to live. Getting rid of the right-to-buy scheme will not deal with the issue. We need to make sure that we build more social homes in Northern Ireland. We need to continue with the social housing development programme. I will continue to lobby for more funds for that, but I will also look at innovative ways for us to increase the supply of social homes and other tenures in Northern Ireland.

Ms Brownlee: I thank the Minister for his statement, which is welcome. As the Minister knows, housing is a critical issue in our East Antrim constituency, so I am pleased that he has brought it to the House. Will the Minister detail what action his Department will take to increase social housing provision, and accessible properties in particular, in Northern Ireland?

Mr Lyons: I am grateful to the Member for raising that question. It is important that people not only have homes but have the homes that are right and appropriate for them. We know that that is a struggle. I look forward to announcing some changes on making sure that

people have appropriate homes, but I want the House to be clear: progressing this policy does not mean that I am stepping back whatsoever from my desire to make sure that we have more social homes in Northern Ireland. The intermediate-rent programme is one tool that will help us to deal with the crisis that we face, but we have built too few social homes over the past number of years. We need to continue to build more of them in order to give people more security. The Member will be aware of the length of time that some families in our constituency have to wait to get into a home. That is not good enough. We want to do better, and I will do all that I can to make sure that the programme moves forward in collaboration with the Housing Executive and housing associations. The real game changer for us will be the Housing Executive's ability to borrow against its assets so that we can refurbish and renovate homes and, most importantly, build new homes. I am committed to getting that done.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire, as ucht do ráitis. [*Translation: Thank you, Minister, for your statement.*] I note that the setting of the intermediate-rent properties will be based on the Housing Executive's analysis and annual reports. Will you set out what other sources of information your Department will use to inform the issue of affordability across constituencies where affordability may vary, which is reflected in the housing market in my constituency of West Tyrone?

Mr Lyons: As I said in my answer to Mrs Erskine, housing stress and housing affordability issues are not unique to urban areas. We find them in rural constituencies as well. The process that will be set out will not be limited to particular areas based on the need there. We will look at Northern Ireland as a whole. The programme will be spread out around at least two local government districts. I have set out those parameters today, but more detail on it will need to be worked out in consultation with others.

Mr Allen: The Minister, rightly, alluded to the fact that we need to leverage a broad array of options in order to tackle the housing crisis facing Northern Ireland. He also highlighted the fact that we previously underutilised FTC. Will he expand on the amount of FTC that this initiative will draw down and whether his Department is exploring other models?

Mr Lyons: As I have always said, we need to explore a number of models, especially with FTC, which has so often been underutilised in

the past. Co-ownership is another way in which we can use FTC to achieve that. I am sure that the Member will not mind if I do not go into the detail of how much FTC we intend to spend, because the programme will open to competition tomorrow, and it would not be wise for me to go into exact numbers. I can, however, confirm that the amount is substantial. I look forward to the competition opening and closing and to our moving forward on the issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): That concludes questions on the statement.

1.00 pm

Ms Armstrong: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am not rising to challenge the earlier decision; I accept it. I ask the Speaker's Office to write to all Ministers to remind them of Standing Order 18A(2), which states that statements should be made available to Members at least 30 minutes before their delivery to the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you. As before, I will send the point of order to the Speaker's Office for advice.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the next item of business will be questions to the Minister for Infrastructure.

The sitting was suspended at 1.00 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Infrastructure

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 11 has been withdrawn.

Park-and-ride Strategy

1. **Mr Honeyford** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether his Department has a park-and-ride strategy to ensure optimal access to the rail and rapid transit networks. (AQO 424/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure): Park-and-ride schemes are a key enabler for improving connections, increasing public transport use, promoting sustainability and encouraging a modal shift to active travel. My Department has identified a list of priority bus- and rail-based park-and-ride sites. Further potential sites will be considered in the new transport strategy and transport plans that are being developed.

I am supportive of expanding our park-and-ride schemes, where needed. However, as the capital budget for my Department is less than that required, I am considering investment plans for 2024-25. As the Member will be aware, public services such as infrastructure are under severe pressure as a result of over a decade of Tory cuts and austerity. Infrastructure is key to connecting our communities, and it is the bedrock upon which we should build our ambitions for the delivery of radical changes to improve lives. Doing that properly will require investment.

Mr Honeyford: Thank you to the Minister for his answer and for his prioritisation of the issue. I recently met his Department and Translink: they lobbied for an extension to the park-and-ride at Moira and told me that it was a priority and that they wanted to deliver it quickly. The extension has since received full planning permission, only for DFI to give notice that it may want to review its own application and decision. Will the Minister give a ministerial direction to stop the internal nonsense and allow Translink to get on with providing a much-needed extension to the park-and-ride at Moira as soon as possible?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. I will certainly look into that in more detail, David, and decide whether or not it is "nonsense". There may be a number of issues at play in ensuring that, moving forward, any investment fits in with the transport plans that are being developed and that we have the budget to deliver that investment.

It is quite clear, as I said in my original answer, that park-and-rides are fantastic facilities: they take private cars off the road and allow people easy access to public transport. However, for me to continue to roll out the programme of park-and-rides, I will require capital budget. In the next number of weeks, I will announce my budget. Unfortunately, I am in the same position as all the Ministers around the Executive table: we simply do not have enough budget to deliver all the plans that we wish to deliver. I will certainly look into the matter in greater detail for the Member.

Mr Boylan: Minister, when do we expect to see the regional transport strategy and the transport plans?

Mr O'Dowd: The transport plans are being developed to support the councils as they develop their local development plans. The timing of the various transport plans across council areas reflects that. For instance, the Fermanagh and Omagh transport plan, the north-west transport plan and the eastern transport plan have all been commenced, with evidence-gathering preparatory work under way for all remaining transport areas.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Minister, my question pertains to the City of Derry Airport. Has park-and-ride provision been considered for there? Are there any further updates on rail connectivity to Derry airport?

Mr O'Dowd: I have no information in front of me about a park-and-ride for the City of Derry Airport. As for connectivity through the rail network, that will form part of the all-island rail review. I hope to be able to publish that review in June. I have to do that in conjunction with my ministerial colleague in the South. We are both working our way through the processes. I have to present it to the Executive, and Minister Ryan has to present it to the Cabinet. I hope to be able to do that in June.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for his update on this important infrastructural asset. Minister, I have been contacted by a number of people who have asked whether there is an opportunity

to see electric vehicle charging points put in at our park-and-ride facilities. Will you look at that to see whether it can be done by Translink? If it is not willing to do so, can the space be opened up to private firms to put in charging points at park-and-ride facilities?

Mr O'Dowd: I understand that that proposal was looked at before. A study was done on whether park-and-rides are the best places for charging points, and it suggested that they were not, because of the nature of those areas and the length of time that vehicles stay there. Only a minimal number of vehicles would be able to be charged, and, during that time, the charger should be available for other vehicles. However, I am always happy to look at aspects or proposals for how we can increase the use of electric vehicles and make them more accessible to the public.

A24 Ballynahinch Bypass

2. **Mrs Mason** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the A24 Ballynahinch bypass. (AQO 425/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: The A24 Ballynahinch scheme will provide a 3.1 kilometre dual carriageway bypass around the town of Ballynahinch, improving journey times and reliability, enhancing road safety and creating place-making opportunities in the town. Due to other investment in major road schemes and the constrained budget position, the scheme was considered as part of the prioritisation of major schemes, and further work on the scheme was paused as part of the outworkings of that review. Any decision to proceed with the A24 Ballynahinch bypass can only be made when I am confident that there is budget certainty for the scheme and that its delivery will be in line with the Department's emerging transport plans.

Mrs Mason: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister agree that the completion of the project would allow us to completely rethink Ballynahinch and include more active travel routes in the area?

Mr O'Dowd: The simple answer is yes. Ballynahinch, like many significant market towns and regional towns, is suffering from traffic congestion from traffic that may not necessarily be doing business in the town but travelling through it. I hope to be in a position to see a number of projects move forward, be that in this financial year or the next financial year, to ensure that we allow such towns to develop alternatives within the town. You will have seen what we have announced, recently, for

Enniskillen, for example. Ballynahinch would definitely benefit from the bypass, not only to take traffic out of the town, but to allow for further active travel options and place-making within the town centre, which, in itself, also brings business into the town centres.

Mr O'Toole: As someone who originally comes from nearby the area that we are talking about, I strongly agree that Ballynahinch needs a bypass. Part of the congestion stretches into Carryduff, in my constituency. Does the Minister agree that part of reducing all those emissions and congestion down the Saintfield Road — from Carryduff onwards — is extending the Glider to Carryduff so that commuters from the like of Ballynahinch, Downpatrick and Newcastle can get the Glider from Carryduff into Belfast to their jobs? Will he commit to delivering that soon? I know that he is looking at it.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member has answered his own question, in a sense. We are looking at an extension of the Glider, for the very reasons that he has outlined. It can, and does, reduce traffic congestion, and, again, meets our climate target challenges by taking more and more private vehicles off the road and encouraging people to use public transport.

Mr McMurray: May I add Castlewella to the list of towns that Matthew O'Toole mentioned from which commuters travel? Will the Minister confirm that the bypass will be reprioritised, given the obvious safety and air quality issues in the town?

Mr O'Dowd: I can assure the Member that the Ballynahinch bypass is being looked at within the 2024-25 capital budget. I hope to be in a position to announce my budget in the next number of weeks. However, I will not be able to do all the planned works that I would have hoped to do in 2024-25. I know that there have been delays to the Ballynahinch bypass, but you also have to plan a number of years ahead, particularly in capital projects. If we cannot move ahead in 2024-25, I will be looking at 2025-26 to get this project up and going.

Mr McNulty: In relation to bypasses, will the Minister provide an update on the progress of the Armagh east and west link roads and when they will be expected to commence on site?

Mr O'Dowd: I have no information on that.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: It is not related to the question.

Mr O'Dowd: It does not relate to the original question. I am more than happy to write to the Member.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes, can you write to the Member? Thank you.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes.

York Street Station

3. **Mr Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for his assessment of the benefits that the newly opened York Street station will bring to the community of North Belfast. (AQO 426/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: The new, modern, fully accessible York Street station is a major public transport facility in north Belfast and will act as a gateway for the locality. The station has seen a significant increase in footfall over the years, with levels projected to increase to 70,000 by 2028-29. The new station has been designed to be fully inclusive for all and has the potential to be a catalyst for further investment in the area. It will provide access to Ulster University, Sailortown, the Cathedral Quarter, City Quays, Cityside and other nearby communities. I am keen that we maximise the potential of rail to support social and economic development and the environmental sustainability of our transport system.

Investment in the railway drives jobs and growth, stimulates development and regeneration, and unlocks housing supply by creating better transport links. Those links can boost access to services, jobs and education. Rail also has an important part to play in tackling the climate emergency. It has a lower environmental impact than other modes of transport, as it emits less carbon and consumes less energy. Improved rail facilities will also deliver environmental benefits by encouraging modal shift, which reduces congestion and emissions and improves safety.

Mr Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for his answer.*] The Minister has probably answered my supplementary question, which is about the facilities at the station. If he has anything to add, that is OK. If he has not, he may have already answered my question.

Mr O'Dowd: I can provide the Member with a few more details, if he so wishes. The station provides for public facilities such as retail space; safe and secure cycle storage, with

about 70 spaces, and connections to existing cycle infrastructure; a Belfast Bikes station delivered as part of phase 2; a new passenger footbridge between platforms; a bus turning circle at the front to facilitate connectivity, especially for local schools that will use the station daily; and increased passenger platform width to reduce congestion at peak times. As the Member can see, not only is it a facility built for the use of railway passengers but there is connectivity with other forms of transport, be they other forms of public transport or active travel.

Miss McAllister: Has the Minister given any consideration to funding? I understand that it is within the remit of the Department for Communities' public realm works. Given the impact that the station will have on connectivity to Sailortown, is regeneration of the tunnel link for pedestrians under consideration? It is important that both Departments work hand in hand when the projects are completed.

Mr O'Dowd: I have no details in front of me, but I am always happy to work with other Departments to try to use our joint resources to improve the environment and facilities for local communities. The York Street junction area will also come into play at some stage. We have done significant work on place-making, ensuring that we are not simply imposing infrastructure on communities but working with them to ensure that their rights and entitlements are taken into consideration. We can improve the environment around them, even though we are placing quite significant pieces of infrastructure in and on those communities.

Portrush to Bushmills Greenway

4. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Portrush to Bushmills greenway. (AQO 427/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: The heads of terms of the Causeway Coast and Glens growth deal was signed on 24 April. As the lead Department, we recently approved the council's strategic outline business case for the Portrush to Bushmills greenway. I am pleased to see that the project has been included in the growth deal. The council will now begin work on the outline business case, and my officials look forward to engaging with it on this exciting project.

Mr McGuigan: Given its location along the north coast and the fact that it is linking two tourist towns, Bushmills and Portrush, this is a great tourism project. Does the Minister agree with me that, beyond tourism, the greenway will

provide many benefits to the local community, including an improvement in the quality of life?

Mr O'Dowd: That is without doubt. We know that providing opportunities for people to be outside and physically active brings many benefits, especially for people's physical and mental health. Walking, wheeling and cycling are easy ways in which for people to build activity into their everyday life. When we are able to provide them with first-class facilities, that encourages more people to do activity. I have no doubt that it will be a great tourist attraction, but equally important is its benefit to the local community.

Mr Frew: Given that the greenway is an important project and a linear route from Portrush to Bushmills, can the Minister encourage Translink to ensure that, when the greenway is up and running and operational, buses will be fitted in such a way that cyclists and walkers can place their bikes and backpacks on them?

Mr O'Dowd: That is a very good point. We will have to have connectivity among all forms of transport if we are to encourage more people to leave the comfort and convenience of their private cars. We are having discussions with Translink about its facilities and making sure that those are not only up to date but fit for purpose. We will certainly continue those discussions.

Mr Allister: This is a joint venture with Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council. What is the ratio of the cost breakdown? Indeed, what is the anticipated cost?

Mr O'Dowd: The usual breakdown of cost is around 50% each.

I do not have the final costs in front of me, Mr Allister, but it usually works on the basis that my Department funds 50% and the local council funds 50%. My Department also provides expertise through its ability to deliver large-scale projects. I am more than happy to supply the Member with whatever costs we have at this stage.

2.15 pm

Ms Hunter: I welcome the update today. Hopefully, we will get a bit of summer sun once the project is complete so that we can use the greenway. Are there any additional plans to invest in greenways in the wider north-west?

Mr O'Dowd: We are working with all of the councils on the promotion of greenways. When I was in this post in 2022, my Department took on a greater engagement and support role with councils in how we deliver greenways. In fairness to councils, delivering major infrastructure projects is not usually within their remit. My Department has the skills and expertise to deliver them, so I want my Department to work in close conjunction with them. We will continue to do that through our active travel unit.

Greenways can present the same challenges as with building traditional infrastructure such as roads, because you go through the property of a significant number of landowners. Some will facilitate; others will have concerns; and others may object. There is always a chance of a challenge with all such matters, but, again, my Department has the expertise in that regard, which we can share with councils and engage with them on.

Road Safety: Schools

5. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on planned initiatives to make roads outside schools safer. (AQO 428/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that the targeted provision of infrastructure at and near schools can go a long way to making our roads and communities safer. My Department utilises a range of measures outside schools to help to make the roads safer such as traffic signs, which can come with flashing amber lights; road markings; coloured surfacing; "School: Keep Clear" markings; parking restrictions and speed limits. In recent years, my Department has installed part-time 20 mph zones at 215 schools, an investment of around £4 million. Work is going on to review the effectiveness of those to determine whether further part-time 20 mph zones can be installed at other schools.

My Department is also developing an active travel delivery plan that will include active travel design guidance specific to here. The new guidance is in the process of being finalised and is expected to be introduced later this year. It will include measures aimed at encouraging more people to walk, wheel and cycle to school. I need to say, however, that the delivery of all of that is subject to funding and the availability of staff.

Mr McGrath: Obviously, all of those measures are welcome and help to allay the fears of parents and children as they go to and from school. Has the Minister given any consideration to the introduction of School Streets schemes, which could help with some of the most intense problems, such as the one at Edward Street in Downpatrick, where parents bring children to Our Lady and St Patrick Primary School?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member has raised that matter with me on a number of occasions. I assure him that my Department is actively investigating that as part of its active development planning. We are specifically looking at Edward Street to see whether a School Street is a solution. I assure the Member that that work is ongoing. I would be interested in getting a number of the pilot schemes going to see whether they deliver the benefits that they certainly have the potential to deliver and whether we can do them in other areas.

Of course, all road users but particularly, around school time, drivers of vehicles have a responsibility to act responsibly around our schools. I have said in the Chamber before that, if a driver does not understand that they need to slow down around a school, I am not sure what sort of signage will encourage them to do so. I encourage drivers to respect other road users, particularly at school times.

Mr Dunne: Will the Minister provide more information on the further roll-out of the 20 mph school speed limit programme, given that the most recent one was in November 2022? Recently, at Grange Park Primary School in my constituency, a young child was, sadly, knocked down and injured as they left the school. Will he commit to rolling that out, given that the clock has been ticking since it was last done?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. A review of the 20 mph speed limit zones around schools has been completed. My officials hope to have it with me in a number of weeks, and I will consider it in due course.

Every Minister comes to the Chamber and says this, but that is because it is fact: when you are dealing with a limited budget, you do not have the resources in your Department to bring forward all of the proposals and policies that you and officials might once have done or would like to do. That slows the whole system up. It is not just when you witness a closure or a cut to a service; the whole system slows up. Unfortunately, there are projects in my

Department that I would like to see move on and that, I have no doubt, my officials would like to see move on, but, given the resources needed to do things — in this case, people — we do not have the resources at hand. I assure the Member that I will move through these as quickly as possible.

Ms Egan: Minister, earlier this year, there was a horrendous incident in North Down, when a child who was leaving school was hit by a car on the Bryansburn Road. What will the Minister do to put urgent safety measures in place on the Bryansburn Road in Bangor to make sure that children walking to and from Grange Park Primary School and St Comgall's Primary School can do so safely?

Mr O'Dowd: In every incident where there is an accident, a collision or, as in this instance, a serious injury, the lead investigation is with the PSNI. The PSNI, working along with my Department, will look at the entirety of the incident. A report will be prepared, and then, if engineering solutions are required in an area, they will be brought forward for completion at a certain time. Again, they have to be prioritised. It sounds awful to talk about prioritisation when you have just reminded me that a young child was knocked down. However, they will be prioritised and delivered in due course.

It is worth noting that, in 95% of all accidents, the cause is human error. It is not about an engineering solution; it is not a matter with the road, the footpath or the cycleway. It is due to human error, which is usually the distraction of the driver in some way.

Traffic-controlling Measures: Whiteabbey

6. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline any progress that has been made to provide traffic-controlling measures at the junction between Shore Road and Glenville Road, Whiteabbey. (AQO 429/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: A study of the Glenville Road/Shore Road junction was undertaken by my Department's consultancy partner. The junction was modelled, and several options were considered, including signalisation of the junction. Signalisation of the junction, however, has significant downsides, increasing congestion on the A2 Shore Road for a relatively small number of vehicle movements. It is also a very costly option and will be competing against other equally important schemes for my Department's limited funding.

In the interim, it is proposed to renew and extend the existing yellow-box markings to provide increased visibility. My Department will also take forward a proposal to prohibit right-turn movement on the Glenville Road and U-turn movement on the signalised junction at Shore Road/Glenavna Road. A full design and detailed estimate for the signalisation of the junction will be progressed as resources permit.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answer; indeed, I got a similar answer from the divisional roads manager today. However, Minister, your answer and the divisional roads manager's answer are localised to that particular area and the number of vehicles. There was a further accident there yesterday. There has practically been one every day in the last couple of weeks. Every time an accident happens at the junction of Glenville Road and Shore Road, traffic is backed up the whole way to the Westlink.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Come to your question, Stewart.

Mr Dickson: There is a wider context than just the 47 vehicle turns at the junction.

Mr O'Dowd: I am aware of the increased accident history at the junction. I was engaged with officials in preparing for Question Time today, and we were talking through the issues. They made me aware of the increased number of accidents at that junction, and I have asked them to look into the matter further. I accept that, when you make a change at a junction or do not make a change, it impacts further down the road, perhaps, sometimes, for several miles. My Department is also aware of that, and officials will look at that as well before we make a final decision on how we move this. The interim measure will be the increase in the yellow box at the area. Again, I urge all drivers to take extreme care when using our roads.

A20 Portaferry Road, Newtownards

7. **Mr Mathison** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to provide an update on the actions he has taken since the Adjournment debate on 12 March 2024 on the A20 Portaferry Road, Newtownards. (AQO 430/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: Following the Adjournment debate on 12 March, I asked my officials to take forward a review of the A20 Portaferry Road from Newtownards to Teal Rocks to establish what engineering measures could be taken forward that may help with road safety. My

officials are making good progress on that review. Regarding the speed limit, a traffic speed assessment is under way to assess the potential of extending the 40 mph speed limit from Newtownards to just beyond Teal Rocks. A plan is also in place to take forward nearly 1 kilometre of resurfacing from Newtownards to just beyond Teal Rocks. That will include a new bus lay-by, subject to the availability of funding. That resurfacing will be part of a 10-year plan for resurfacing along the A20 Portaferry Road. As part of the resurfacing work, consideration will be given to the installation of road-edge white lining, verge hazard marker posts and road studs that will help driver visibility.

Mr Mathison: I thank the Minister for his answer. Much of that seems to be positive. The speed limit is an issue that constituents regularly raise with reps across the constituency. When will the review of the speed limit on the stretch of road in question be completed? Will he engage directly with elected reps for the area, as he undertook to do in the Adjournment debate, to explain the rationale for any decisions that are taken?

Mr O'Dowd: I am more than happy for my officials to engage with elected representatives on the rationale for decisions; that would be helpful for both sides. As for when the speed limit will, potentially, be reduced, officials are working their way through the process, collecting information and confirming the viability of a speed change. If such a change is deemed suitable, legislation will be needed. That will require a consultation process and could take up to nine months to complete. Nine months is a significant period to make a speed limit change.

The process that has to be followed is set out in legislation, and that is one of the matters that I will examine further with my officials. I do not think, in fairness, that that will help in this case, but we have to look at whether there is a more effective and efficient way of responding to such matters.

Miss McIlveen: The Minister will be aware that the route is subject to coastal erosion. I am keen to know what discussions he has had with his counterpart at Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in relation to the coastal forum and any work specifically on coastal erosion that may be carried out along that route.

Mr O'Dowd: My officials sit on the coastal forum, and Minister Muir and I have agreed to meet on the matter of coastal erosion. I hastily add that DAERA has lead responsibility, but,

again, I am more than happy to work with other Ministers and Departments to ensure that we make the most effective use of our limited resources.

York Street Interchange

8. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the proposal for the York Street interchange project. (AQO 431/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: Major road schemes are an important part of the work that is delivered by my Department, as we seek to reduce journey times, increase reliability and improve road safety. In October 2022, I published a placemaker and active travel review report on the scheme and asked my officials to carry out further work on three scenarios recommended in it. That work is nearing completion. Due to underinvestment in major road schemes and the constrained budget position, the scheme was considered as part of the prioritisation of major schemes, and further work on it was paused as part of the outworkings of that review.

A decision to proceed with the York Street interchange project can be made only when I am confident that there is budget certainty for the scheme and that its delivery is in line with my Department's emerging transport plans.

Mr Chambers: I am disappointed to hear about the ongoing delay, Minister. This has, as you said, been on the agenda and an Executive priority since 2002. Given that the York Street interchange stalemate has cost the Northern Ireland economy about £1 billion a year, what assurance can the Minister give that he will prioritise that project?

Mr O'Dowd: The York Street interchange is one of many priorities for my Department and, indeed, the Executive. We will have to look at how we can deliver some of the major projects. As I said to other Members, I am going through my capital budget and hope to make an announcement on that in the next number of weeks. That will outline whether there will be continued movement on the York Street interchange.

Significant priority work has been done, some of which was absolutely necessary. I have talked about the placemaking that we have done in that area. We are placing a significant piece of infrastructure on top of communities and businesses, and it is right and proper that they have their say on how we move forward

with the project. I will be able to announce in the next number of weeks whether the project will move forward significantly in the next financial year.

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

2.30 pm

A6: Funding

T1. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to tell the House, following the Finance Minister's provision of an earmarked capital allocation of £85.6 million to his Department for the A6 and the Belfast transport hub, how much of that will be spent on the A6 and how exactly it will be spent. (AQT 281/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: Negotiations are continuing between my officials and the contractor. As you will know, the A6 completion works opened this time last year. There are ongoing discussions between my officials and the contractor about signing off on that contract — the final payment. That is obviously a significant, commercially sensitive engagement that I cannot go into in any further detail. We are also looking at how we move forward with the next phase of the A6, and the Member will be aware of the Mobuoy dump site. We are engaging with the Environment Agency and others to ensure that whatever successful conclusion comes from that takes into account the needs of my Department in moving the project forward.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answer. The same statement from the Finance Minister contained the very welcome £88 million from the Dublin Government for the A5. Will the Minister confirm whether there are any strings attached to that funding, such as when the money must be spent by, and does he intend to allocate any of DFI's capital budget to the A5 this year?

Mr O'Dowd: Whether I am able to allocate funding to the A5 this year depends on my position when I make my announcement in the summer in relation to the A5 and respond to the recommendations of the Planning Appeals Commission's report.

The Member asked whether there are strings attached to the contribution from the Dublin Government. I would not say that there are strings attached, but, obviously, they will want

to be assured that their money is being used effectively and efficiently and for the purpose for which it has been designated to my Department. I can assure you and others that that will be the case if and when I make my announcement in the summer.

Pavement Parking

T2. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on his Department's plans to tackle obstructive pavement parking. (AQT 282/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: The Member will be aware that, in 2023, my Department updated the legislation on inconsiderate and illegal pavement parking. Those measures are in place and include bus stops, cycleways, crossing areas, school patrol areas, school crossings etc. It is now a matter for the PSNI to enforce them. There is also the report on inconsiderate parking, which I will take further time to consider to see whether there is any requirement for new legislation or enhanced measures.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for his update. Minister, I have recently been contacted by a number of individuals who use wheelchairs to get around on a daily basis, and pavement parking is obviously an issue that they are majorly impacted by. Another issue that they have raised with me is their ability to use power-assist devices, which enables them to add an adaptation to their manual wheelchair to get around. However, current legislation is causing a barrier, and I know that one individual has engaged with your Department. Are you willing to meet me and them to discuss that matter?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not usually accept meetings while on the Floor of the House, but, given the circumstances, I am more than happy to do so, Andy.

Roads: Grass Cutting

T3. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether, having had "No mow April" and "No mow May" from his Department, we will now have "No mow June". (AQT 283/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: The Member needs to understand why we have "No mow April" and "No mow May" and why we might have to have "No mow June" as well. It is not for budgetary reasons. We are facing a biodiversity crisis as well as a climate crisis. My Department is a significant

landowner, and the grass verges along our roadways and road networks are ideal settings for biodiversity to thrive. We have to manage those road verges from a road safety perspective as well. When I was in this post a couple of years ago, I introduced a new policy on when, how and how often we should cut our grass verges. That has now been brought into line. We are attempting to ensure that sight lines are kept, but, again, we face budgetary pressures around that.

When the general public understand why we are doing these things, they are very acceptive and supportive. I recently visited Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, which has an excellent scheme in place. It also faced some criticism at the start around the measures, but when residents understood why they were happening, they were very supportive of them.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he recognise the real road safety concerns that exist and the need for a proper balanced approach between road safety and our environment, particularly when sight lines are restricted, as is the case today, not just in North Down but across Northern Ireland, including along the A2 dual carriageway, the Bangor ring road and the Bangor to Ards dual carriageway? It makes manoeuvres across those busy carriageways and junctions very dangerous for all road users. We cannot emphasise enough the importance of road safety, particularly when we see the very frightening and startling road deaths across the country.

Mr O'Dowd: Despite my support for the biodiversity along our road network, road safety comes first. Sight lines will be maintained. If the Member has any areas of concern, he should report them to his local section office to follow them up. Resource issues mean that there will be challenges for my Department in responding as quickly as it once did. The policy pertains to areas where we can do this safely, but road safety will always take priority.

Bushmills Regeneration Scheme

T4. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he has had sight of the Bushmills regeneration scheme and the work on the traffic and parking infrastructure for the town. (AQT 284/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: No, I have not had sight of that. It has not come across my desk.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for his answer. Then, can I put it on record, please, Minister, that you will look at it? Will you ensure that it is a priority for your Department and that the population of Bushmills will have a great buy-in to the future plans, especially around the traffic management of the town, which should have a positive effect, but, in some cases, has a negative effect?

Mr O'Dowd: I am more than happy to ask my officials for a report on the matter. The Member is absolutely correct. With any scheme, there should be full consultation with residents and local businesses.

Urban Trees

T5. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what policies are in place to replace the urban trees that have been lost through disease, storm damage, vandalism or accidental damage. (AQT 285/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department seeks, wherever possible, to replace during the next planting season trees lost through disease, storm damage, vandalism or for other reasons. Generally, that happens over the winter months. Where replacement at the same location is not possible, an alternative site will be sought. The maintenance of trees seeks to prevent obstructions to sight lines and signs, ensuring that they do not become a hazard to road users and allow for the safe passage of road users, as well as maintaining the effectiveness of road lighting.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his response. Further to that, what discussion has his Department had with councils and other bodies about operating in partnership to develop programmes to replace urban trees, such as the trees for streets scheme that operates on the mainland?

Mr O'Dowd: The scheme to which the Member refers is a non-profit enterprise that runs a national tree sponsorship scheme to assist local councils with the cost of street tree planting. The Department works closely with a number of councils across a wide range of biodiversity issues, including the provision and maintenance of tree stocks. In Belfast, which has the largest number of street trees, my Department has a formal partnership with Belfast City Council to look after those valuable assets that enhance the amenity of urban areas, as well as contributing to and improving air quality.

My Department is willing to consider any schemes or partnerships that will allow the planting of additional trees. I will follow up on the Member's suggestion about the scheme that is running in England, Scotland and Wales.

Road Safety: PSNI Meeting

T6. **Mr Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, after declaring an interest as a member of the Policing Board, whether, following the Minister's recent meeting with the PSNI on road safety, which he welcomed, especially after some terrible recent losses, he will update the House on that engagement. (AQT 286/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: As the Member said, last week, I had a constructive and informative meeting with the police. We discussed how we can work collectively to improve road safety not just on the A5 but across our road network. The Department is looking at further engineering measures that we can implement on the existing A5 to improve road safety, and the police are looking at enforcement measures. However, I have to say that, as I said to Members during Question Time, we can all play our part. It is an issue for society.

In the six days since I met the police, two more people have died on our roads, bringing the death toll this year to 24. I send my heartfelt condolences to the families and friends of all who have lost their lives on our roads. In the North, the death rate on our roads is, on average, one per week. Think about that: those are people, not simply statistics. They are young and old and all are beloved family members and friends. Every single week, we lose someone on our roads, and I appeal to all road users to ensure that the actions that we take on our roads ensure that we arrive home safely and that the people we share our roads with also arrive home safely.

Mr Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire [*Translation: I thank the Minister.*] I add my voice, as I am sure everyone else does, to the condolences that he has sent out to those who have lost loved ones. On the basis of that, when can we expect the road safety strategy?

Mr O'Dowd: I hope to bring the road safety strategy 2030 to the Executive in the coming weeks for their clearance and support. Thereafter, and once the outworkings of our budgets for the Department and our road safety partners are known, work will commence on a detailed action plan to assist in the targeted delivery of the objectives in that strategy. The

strategy recognises that collisions are inevitable but does not accept that they should ever result in death or serious injury. By 2030, we aim to reduce death and serious injury by at least 50%, with our long-term aim being to achieve zero road deaths by 2050. We aim to achieve that by taking a holistic approach to road safety through the enforcement of safe roads, safe vehicles and safe people, and we will do that through a programme of education, engineering and enforcement.

A1 Upgrade

T7. **Mrs Dodds** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when, having rightly pointed out the tragedy of deaths on our roads and knowing that the A1 has been a source of death and accidents for a long time, he will announce the promised upgrades to the A1 dual carriageway, now that he has received his budget. (AQT 287/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: As I said to colleagues, I am working my way through my capital budget, and I hope to be able to make an announcement in the next number of weeks. I am acutely conscious of the death toll on the A1, and I have met Monica Heaney and you and your party colleagues on that matter. I am doing everything in my power to ensure that that project moves on as quickly as possible.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you. That is encouraging. We have spoken about this at length, and it is a really important project. In light of that, will the Minister share with the House what other projects he is considering in the Upper Bann constituency in the short to medium term?

Mr O'Dowd: I am tempted to say "all of them". Everything in Upper Bann is under consideration. [*Laughter.*] I am perhaps putting myself into difficulty. The major road infrastructure project that is required in Upper Bann at this stage is the A1 project.

Enniskillen Bypass: Procurement

T8. **Ms Á Murphy** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline some of the benefits of social value in the procurement process for the Enniskillen bypass. (AQT 288/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: The term "social value" can be hard to understand for the general public. We have noted that, when my colleagues in the Department are out consulting, it is difficult to get a response from the general public. I am of the view that, if you were to go to somebody

and ask what they think of social valuing, you would perhaps spend longer talking about what social valuing is than you would finding out what people would add to it.

Social value seeks to create positive benefits for residents, businesses and stakeholder through four themes: delivering zero carbon; promoting well-being; increasing secure employment and skills; and building ethical and resilient supply chains. A social value engagement has been carried out to capture the views of the community in the Enniskillen area on what additional benefits can be brought to the town through the delivery of the scheme. That input will help the Department to tailor meaningful social value outcomes as part of a scheme for delivery by the appointed contractor.

Ms Á Murphy: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, most importantly, when can we expect to see diggers on the ground for commencement?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Very quickly.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes. Hopefully, diggers will be on the ground in late spring or early summer of 2025, and the scheme is anticipated to take two years to complete.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up. Sorry, Claire. I was really hoping to get you in, but he spent too much time taking about Upper Bann. *[Laughter.]* Members, please take your ease while we change the top Table.

2.45 pm

(Mr Speaker [Mr Poots] in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I beg to move

That the Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call on the Minister to open the debate.

Mrs Long: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I seek the Assembly's approval for the Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024. That is SR 2024/72. The motion is that this order be approved.

Article 2 of the order extends the provisions allowing courts and statutory tribunals in Northern Ireland to receive evidence, wholly or in part, using audio or video conferencing, systems but primarily video. These systems are commonly referred to as live links. They facilitate the wider provision of remote evidence as well as disposing of mentions or hearings, which can include matters such as first appearances and bail applications. This extension, covering the period from March to September 2024, is to allow us to maintain access to live links provision, which has proved to be an essential element of the toolkit for addressing the backlog of cases accrued during and since the pandemic, as well as allowing us to maintain efficacy in the system while we take forward work in parallel to put new primary legislation in place.

Nine weeks ago yesterday, on 11 March, I moved a similar motion for approval on a similar statutory rule, SR 2023/138. It was heartening on that occasion to hear recognition from those Members who spoke of the clear need for these provisions to be maintained, especially at a time of scarce resources. That debate also gave

Members the opportunity to voice their concerns about having to rely on emergency legislation in order to maintain access to these provisions. I acknowledge those concerns, and, indeed, I share them. It remains my clear preference to have our own primary provision in place, and we are working closely with the Committee for Justice with a view to creating a pathway that will allow us to achieve that as soon as possible. The contributions made during the previous debate indicated to me a level of acceptance among Members that the reality is that there is no practicable alternative to continuing to rely on these provisions as a temporary measure. That reflects the fact that we have a shortened mandate, the backlog of legislation from the previous mandate, and our constrained resources.

Whilst the current legislative underpinning for live links is not ideal, the benefits are clear. They can reduce the impact on those involved in court proceedings when going through what is already a stressful event. They allow children to give evidence in a more child-friendly environment. They avoid children and their parents having to be in separate locations while waiting to give evidence. They reduce the risk of unplanned encounters between victims and witnesses and the defendant, and can help to meet the Victim Charter obligation to provide separate waiting areas. Ultimately, they save time and resources, including — particularly — expert witnesses, reducing the carbon footprint and allowing us to maximise the investment already made in technology. I welcome the evidence that the Commissioner-designate for Victims of Crime provided when she appeared before the Justice Committee on the benefits that live links can deliver, particularly for victims of crime, which she supported with compelling real-life examples.

I ask Members to take account of the fact that, on each occasion that we have reached out to consult or engage with stakeholders with regard to live links, they have been overwhelmingly supportive of the continued use of the provisions. There is firm evidence that the availability of an enhanced digital court environment supports the needs of court users. I also draw Members' attention to the fact that we are working at pace to bring forward fresh legislation that will place us on that footing going forward. We hope to complete the process of that being delivered to the Committee for its consideration, and then onwards to the Assembly, before recess. We are not dragging our heels but, sadly, we will need to rely on these emergency provisions for a little longer. I commend the approval of the

order to the Assembly, and I thank Members for their time.

Mr Speaker: I call Stewart Dickson to speak on behalf of the Justice Committee.

Mr Dickson: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I am pleased to speak briefly on the motion as a member of the Committee for Justice. By way of explanation, our Chairperson is unavailable today. I also add a word of congratulations to our former Deputy Chair, who has been appointed as a Minister and is thus no longer a member of the Committee.

As the Minister outlined, the statutory rule before us extends the provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020 that allow courts and statutory tribunals to receive evidence through audio and video links until 24 September 2024. It is, as the Minister said, the second time that the current Committee for Justice has considered a statutory rule to extend the provisions, and the Committee's position remains the same.

During the debate on the motion to approve the Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023, the Committee Chairperson pointed out that the:

"Committee agreed to ask the Department for its views on whether the continued use of the powers in the Coronavirus Act 2020 is appropriate and proportionate in the post-COVID environment. The Committee also requested an update on the Department's plans to make permanent provision for the use of audio and video links."

As the Chairperson said at that time:

"the Committee was advised that the Minister was satisfied that there remains a clear role for the continued use of the provisions in order to tackle the backlog of cases that have accrued during and since the pandemic and that may take until 2028 to clear without extra resources. The Department also advised that it is the Minister's intention to include provisions for the wider use of live links in the first Bill that it plans to introduce, which is anticipated before the summer recess. The Committee was assured that reliance on the powers that are in the Coronavirus Act 2020 is, therefore, an interim arrangement."

It was also pointed out during the debate on the motion to approve the previous order that the

Committee has been advised that, although the plan is to include the permanent provision for live links in the first departmental Bill of the mandate:

"it is unlikely that the necessary provisions will be drafted in time for inclusion in the Bill as introduced but will instead be tabled as amendments at Consideration Stage." — [Official Report (Hansard), 11 March 2024, p13, col 2].

The Chairperson and the then Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice met the Minister about that matter, and the Committee has been corresponding with the Department on it. Although the Minister and the Department have offered various reassurances, the Committee still has some concerns about the approach. We know, however, that the Bill will go through its various stages, as will its provisions.

As I stated at the beginning of my contribution, the Committee's position remains the same. Most, if not all, of the Committee members are broadly supportive of the use of live links and agree that they should be a feature of our courts system. The Committee considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 25 April 2024 and was content with it. The Committee noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules raised no concerns about the technical aspects of the statutory rule in her report dated 16 April 2024. On behalf of the Committee for Justice, I support the motion.

I will now speak briefly as the Alliance Party's justice spokesperson. I recently had the privilege of joining Committee members on a visit to the Belfast live link centre. We were deeply impressed by the advanced technology and the dedicated staff who provide that vital service. The facilities are outstanding, and they are clearly designed to put witnesses at ease by ensuring that they feel safe and supported during what can be a very challenging time. The service plays a crucial role in modernising our justice system and making it more efficient and accessible.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the backlog of cases has become a significant issue. Live link centres are pivotal in addressing that backlog, allowing for remote testimony and hearings, which speeds up the judicial process. Not passing the statutory rule would have far-reaching and devastating consequences, particularly for vulnerable and often traumatised witnesses, including young people and children. The service's impact cannot be overstated. It ensures that justice is not delayed and that the

voices of those who may find it difficult to attend court in person are heard.

I commend the caring and dedicated staff, who work tirelessly to provide that essential service, and all those who contributed to its successful implementation. By supporting the statutory rule today, we are taking a significant step towards a more responsive and resilient justice system that meets the needs of all individuals, regardless of their circumstances.

Ms Ferguson: I, too, welcome the extension of provisions, under the Coronavirus Act 2020, relating to live links for courts and tribunals. We support the motion. Although our preference would have been to include the live links provision in primary legislation in the Assembly, we support this continued short-term measure. We welcome the fact that the Minister has made a commitment to ensuring that this will be included as part of a wider Bill that will be introduced. We understand the importance of live links pleas for the criminal courts, and, in particular, the stress and anxiety that they remove for victims. The extension of live links is essential for victims of crime, and that is why we need to see legislation that includes this as soon as possible. Live links allow children to give evidence in safe, child-friendly environments, which is critical. Live links in courts and tribunals also play a critical role in protecting victims.

Like my Committee colleague, the previous contributor, I had the opportunity to visit the live links facility in Belfast. It is an absolutely fantastic facility that we should look to extend to other areas across the North, so that more people can benefit from it. I, too, commend the staff, who are very dedicated and are committed to providing that service.

Mr Frew: I rise on behalf of my party. Our justice spokesperson — the Justice Committee Chairperson — is not available today. I speak on behalf of the party, in her absence.

I have had experience on the Justice Committee: pushing, fighting, scrapping and enquiring about the modernisation of our court systems. To me, this is an absolute no-brainer. The Assembly and the Executive absolutely could and should have been pushing for this provision, maybe 10 years ago. It would have been seen as a very good idea then, not only to modernise the courts but to halt the delay in justice and speed it up. We know that justice delayed is justice denied. Many people suffer needlessly through a court process because of the lack of speed in our justice system.

I do not think that anyone in the House could argue against this statutory rule. We should all support the rule and the provisions that it lays out. However, it is nearly by default that this really good advancement has been progressed. The vehicle that is being used for this is the Coronavirus Act 2020. In my eyes, and the eyes of many of the public, that legislation is horrendous and harmful. These provisions are connected to the harmful and horrendous restrictions of the Coronavirus Act 2020 and the undemocratic nature of it all. That Act placed the Assembly in a zombie zone, where the Health Minister, in particular, had the power to dream up provisions in his sleep, have them drawn up in the morning and enforced in the evening. That is the stigma that is attached to the vehicle that is the Coronavirus Act 2020. We would like to get that Act removed as quickly as possible. I am glad that the Justice Committee has applied pressure on the Department over that, just as the Finance Committee has applied pressure on the Finance Department. I praise the work of the Departments of Finance and Justice: they now know that they must now move on and have bespoke regulations and law.

The Finance Minister brought forward SL1s, which will come online in September, to have bespoke legislation for the registration of deaths and stillbirths.

That is to be welcomed, because that is the way that it should have been done in the first place. They are good ideas that this legislature — the Executive and the Assembly — should pick up and run with anyhow.

3.00 pm

I am glad that the Department of Justice is bringing forward bespoke legislation, albeit in a wider justice Bill. I have concerns about that, and I hope that the Minister will be able to address some of them. The fact that it is part of a wider Bill might mean that the Executive will have to take more time to look at it, and that will mean that the Committee will take longer to scrutinise it. That means that things could change in the wider piece. I ask this respectfully of the Minister: would it not have been better to have a bespoke SL1 for this one provision, which could have been moved quicker, as the Department of Finance has done with regard to the registration of deaths and stillbirths? Could that have been an option for her, and might it still be an option, especially if her wider Bill gets bogged down in some way?

Having said all that, I support the fact that live links can be used. They can help to reduce delays and speed up justice and can help to lessen the enormous burden on everyone involved in the judicial system, in particular the victims of crime.

Mr O'Toole: We will support the continuation of the statutory rule and the provision for live links to be used in the way that they are. I will simply echo the point that it is really important that we move beyond the temporary provisions in the coronavirus legislation. The Minister was absolutely right when she talked about the huge benefits of the use of live links, particularly for victims of crime. However, as we were clear about with the Health Minister when he unsuccessfully moved much broader coronavirus legislation, it is really important that we move beyond those provisions.

In a principled way, we are legislators here, and we debate motion after motion, none of which has any legislative effect. We find time to do that, so it is important to put the provision on a permanent basis quickly. I am not saying that there has been undue delay in the Department, and I welcome the fact that the Minister has said that that is the clear intent. I put that on the record and say that we support the secondary legislation that is being brought forward today.

Mrs Long: I thank all the Members who have contributed to the debate on the order. First, it is pleasing that there is broad consensus in the Assembly for the need to maintain the provisions in the temporary fashion that we have but also that there is broad consensus for us to put this on a firm legislative footing going forward, which is my preference. That consensus evidences the benefit of working towards a common purpose, reducing budgetary pressures, assisting the efficient use of available resources and meeting the needs of the Northern Ireland public, in particular those who come into contact with or need to avail themselves of the justice system.

I thank Members for their contributions today, and I want to address some of the issues that have been raised. First, there was a valid question about the Communities and Finance Departments being able to bring forward statutory rules — subordinate legislation — to the House to achieve their objectives. We are unable to do that, as there is no primary legislation in place that would allow us to bring forward regulations in this space. Therefore, we have to have new primary legislation, which, as Members will be aware, is a longer process. That also needs to be accommodated against and alongside other legislative requirements.

Members will remember that, towards the end of the last mandate, we had a mixed content Bill that dealt with disparate matters that were stripped back to create the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Bill. However, those disparate offences and other relevant items still need to be taken forward, and the intention is to wrap that into the new legislation that is coming forward alongside live links and other measures.

Irrespective of personal preference, there is insufficient time and resource to accommodate a series of smaller Bills in this mandate. In fact, we have been told specifically, in advice from the Executive, that we can have, I think, one Bill a year on the basis of "One in, one out". If we were to do a small, focused Bill, we would lose the larger, mixed content Bill. We cannot afford to do that because of the pressing need for the other legislation to pass. We have a shortened mandate for legislation and a backlog of legislative changes from the last mandate. We therefore have a mixed content Bill at the start of the mandate, of which this measure will be part, and, hopefully, two further Bills will follow. The first of those will deal with sentencing issues and will be slightly more focused, and the last will deal with victims-based issues.

I want to ensure that any legislation that we make in this space is robust and future-proofed and takes account of learning from the past few years. The Members who stated that live links should have been done years ago are beating the same drum as the Department has been beating for a considerable time. However, it took an emergency like COVID to convince all court users and participants in the justice system that live links would be a viable alternative. That was not without challenge, because it was introduced at pace in response to an emergency, but we have been able to learn from that experience. I am not proposing that the legislation that will come to the Assembly will simply replicate what was in the Coronavirus Act; we want to reflect on the feedback that we have received from court users and participants through our consultation and the targeted engagement exercise that we have undertaken.

Mr O'Toole: I appreciate the Minister's giving way. I welcome everything that she has said. It all makes sense. She mentioned receiving guidance on having one Bill a year. Did that guidance come from the head of the Civil Service, or has it come to Ministers via TEO? It would be helpful to have clarity on that.

Mrs Long: It is an issue of drafting capacity in the Assembly. Mr Speaker has indicated similar

restrictions on, for example, private Members' Bills. There is a limit to our drafting capacity. Clearly, in my case, having one Bill a year is also to allow the Committee not to have to deal with overlaps. Members who sat on the Justice Committee last time, when we did five Bills in, I think, two years, will know that there was considerable overlap. As we were reaching one stage of one Bill, a new Bill was being introduced for consultation. We had to do that in order to drive the Bills forward, given the urgency of the content, but it is not the ideal position. I would like the Committee to have the time to focus on each Bill in turn, sequentially. The process might have to become slightly more contracted towards the end of the mandate, but we are trying to do that in order to give the Committee as much capacity and space to scrutinise as possible.

Members also raised the need to use the measure to address the backlogs in the system. Those will take time and resources to clear, and we have been open and honest about that. However, on the basis of the management information, the number of defendants in the court system at March 2024 in comparison with the number of cases across the criminal courts is 23% higher than it was in March 2020. This is about us not just improving on the situation and recovering from COVID but improving on the situation that predated COVID by speeding up justice generally. There are approximately 68% more defendants in the Crown Court and 52% more defendants in the Magistrates' Court in comparison with 1 March 2020. Live links are part of the picture of what we have been doing to deliver more speedy justice. That is good not only for defendants, victims and witnesses but for the resources in the justice system, and we are following other tracks, including looking at avoidable delay, to ensure that we save as much resource as possible in the system.

The pathway that has been set out today to maintain access to the use of live links is, ultimately, victim-focused. Members who visited the remote evidence centre (REC) and saw what the remote evidence setting was, particularly for children but also for vulnerable adults and witnesses giving evidence in complex and sensitive cases, reflected, I think, on how impressive a facility it was. It has made a huge difference, not only in places where we thought that it would. For example, in a number of family law contest cases, the knowledge that the witnesses and victims would turn up to give evidence led to people pleading out on the day, which avoided people having to go through a traumatic trial process. Often, people will game the system in the hope that a victim or witness will drop out at the last minute due to the stress

of appearing in court. Live links have eliminated that, and, therefore, we are getting better results, which is important. Ultimately, this is about delivering the right justice at the right time, and it is important that we are able to do that.

Live links have also been critical in helping to address the challenges presented to the justice system until primary legislation can be made by the Assembly. The inability for us to do it by regulation is unfortunate, but the modernisation of justice Bill — hopefully, that primary legislation will begin its passage through the House prior to the summer recess — is the right vehicle. It will, hopefully, reassure Members that progress is being made in this regard and that I view these specific measures on live links and courts as purely a temporary holding position.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Minister. For clarity, the Speaker's Office and, indeed, the Assembly have no issue with legislation coming forward from the Executive. We welcome legislation coming from the Executive and will seek to facilitate it in every way possible. The support for private Members is entirely different from that for Executive Ministers. We have a limited budget. If there is a problem with legislation, and Members may wish to enquire about that, it will not come from the Speaker's Office or, indeed, the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That the Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 be affirmed.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Minister to open the debate.

Dr Archibald: Before I deal with the statutory rule (SR), I will set out some background to the

measure. The scheme was designed by my Department as an amendment to the Rates (Amendment) Act 2012, following a proposal by Belfast Chamber of Commerce. At that time, the economy was coming out of the global downturn, and the Executive introduced a package of measures to help town and city centres. Sadly, many of the issues facing the high street then have become prevalent again, with many households and businesses facing increased costs as a result of geopolitical events and their impact on energy costs and inflation.

The "Back in Business" scheme, as it was later branded, aims to provide key support through a 50% reduction for businesses that move into properties that have been vacant for one year or more. The scheme's introduction here inspired similar schemes in England, Scotland and Wales before my predecessor, Minister Murphy, extended the measure in 2022 to provide a 24-month rates reduction at 50%, helping new businesses to adjust to rates liability in those difficult opening years of trading.

The purpose of today's legislation is to reinstate the Back in Business scheme, which lapsed in March 2023 as a result of the absence of a functioning Assembly. The statutory rule makes no change to the policy in place previously. It simply reintroduces the measure until the end of the rating year, after which I will consider aligning its operation with any multi-year Budget settlement that can be agreed at Executive level.

Many of you will be familiar with the sad sight of vacant properties on our high streets. Empty properties undermine civic pride and confidence. They send out a negative perception of our towns and cities. I know that all of us in the Chamber are passionate about the need to reinvigorate our towns and cities. That is why, when we returned in February, I advised the Assembly that I would reintroduce the scheme to support our high streets. When I took up office, one of the first things that business representatives requested of me was the reintroduction of the scheme to help boost the creation of new businesses and drive footfall for existing businesses in towns and cities. I am, therefore, delighted to be in a position to bring the order before the Assembly so quickly after the immediate priority of setting the regional rate for 2024-25 has been legislated for.

Today's order reimplements the scheme, which will become operative this week. The reintroduction of the Back in Business scheme

will incentivise the occupation of retail units on the high street that have sat vacant for 12 months.

As has always been the case, the scheme will be subject to ongoing monitoring over the next year to assess its roll-out.

3.15 pm

Today's extension will allow Land and Property Services (LPS) to receive new applications for the scheme until 31 March 2025, and LPS will also undertake publicity for the scheme to attempt to maximise uptake. It will help to provide new businesses with some certainty on overheads and help them to adjust to budgeting for their business. When they adjust to full rates liability in due course, the Executive and councils will then benefit from the growth in tax base. In my first few months as Minister, I have stressed the importance of growing our tax base by encouraging new businesses and business growth.

Importantly, in the first two years of business, the Department still generates the same revenue as it would have raised had the property simply remained as a long-term vacant unit. The scheme is, therefore, one of those rare things in the rating system: a win-win, providing support to new businesses while growing revenue in the longer term. While the scheme has operated for a number of years in different guises, there have been no instances of it being misused, nor has there been any evidence of displacement. That was true of the most recent iteration of the scheme where the recipients were largely sole traders occupying lower-value units as they started or expanded their businesses.

Members of the Finance Committee have already been advised of the detail of the statutory rule. Members indicated at SL1 stage that they were content for the scheme to be reintroduced and run to 31 March 2025. That was confirmed following the making of the rule and the Committee's associated clearance on 17 April.

On the substantive details of the order, article 1 sets out the citation and commencement, and article 2 provides for the amendment of article 31D of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, substituting the old date with the new end date of 31 March 2025. The prior legislation — the Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2022 — is then revoked by virtue of article 3.

In conclusion, I look forward to hearing what Members have to say about the measure. I commend the Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 to the House.

Mr O'Toole (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): In the first instance, I will speak on the statutory rule as Chair of the Finance Committee. I very much thank the Minister for her comments. The Committee has given extensive consideration to the statutory rule to reinstate the Back in Business scheme, which allows any new business that occupies a long-term vacant property valued as a retail unit to pay rates at the vacant rating level for a two-year period.

The policy proposal was considered first at the Committee meeting on 6 March 2024. At that time, members agreed to seek clarification from the Department of Finance on a number of issues related to the policy proposal, including confirmation that it was not possible for businesses to avail themselves of the Back in Business scheme at the same time as being in receipt of any other rate relief, information on the recipients most likely to benefit from the scheme and any data to support that information. Members also agreed to ask whether officials had examined potential adjustments to the scheme in the context of the recent consultations on additional revenue raising.

The Committee, at its meeting on 20 March, noted additional information from the Department indicating that the enabling power used for the rule expressly prevents the award of additional rate support in the rating system, as per article 31D of the Rates Order 1977. Members also noted that the majority of recipients in the last active period of the scheme were small, independent enterprises occupying units with low rateable values.

Finally, the Committee noted that adjustments to the scheme on foot of the recent consultation on additional revenue raising had not been considered. However, the Department indicated that the scheme was extended in its last iteration to provide support for 24 months, as opposed to the original 12 months. That was done on foot of the findings of the business rates review in 2019. Since then, stakeholders have not made vocal calls for a revision of the scheme, but they did publicly request that the scheme be reintroduced by the Assembly when it returned. That was also requested at a ministerial meeting with stakeholders on 22 February 2024.

The SR was, subsequently, formally laid in the Assembly Business Office on 4 April as SR 2024/87. At the Committee meeting on 17 April, members noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR) had not drawn any issues with the rule to the Committee's attention. Therefore, the Committee agreed to recommend that the rule be affirmed by the Assembly. The Finance Committee supports the motion to affirm it.

I will make some brief remarks in a political capacity as leader of the Opposition and leader of the SDLP group in the Assembly. We support the reintroduction of the Back in Business scheme. I welcome that, upon her appointment, the Minister moved swiftly to do that. It is an important, albeit, in scale, relatively modest, incentive in the rates system to get businesses, particularly microenterprises, back into vacant properties on the high street. It is worth saying that that can only be one part of the effort: we need something much broader. I know that she is looking at the rates system, more broadly, and taking advice from her officials, including on foot of the review that was first ordered by the Secretary of State, I think, before Christmas.

I also want to point out one other slight anomaly. Perhaps, it is not an anomaly, but something for us to think about: vacant property relief, more broadly. I strongly suspect that the Minister may already be thinking about it. Obviously, the scheme is linked to vacant property relief, because when businesses take up vacant properties, the property is no longer vacant and is occupied by going concerns and operating businesses, which hold on to 50% of the vacant property relief for a period afterwards. We know that the vacant property relief, generally, as opposed to the Back in Business scheme, which keeps hold of the vacant property relief, is, in Northern Ireland, very generous. That is not to say that it should not exist, but it is much more generous than schemes in any neighbouring jurisdiction. Statistics contained in the Minister's response to a question for written answer in the past couple of weeks show that nearly 6,000 of the businesses that claim vacant property relief have been doing so for more than 10 years, and almost 9,000 have been claiming it for more than five years. That suggests, at the most generous, that there is a little bit of dead weight in that tax incentive. It also suggests that there is space to better target vacant property relief and to better do what the Minister is trying to do with the Back in Business scheme, which is incentivise people back into business rather than have them avail themselves of a never-ending tax relief on a property that, in some cases, it seems, they have no realistic desire to

let or reoccupy. If someone is claiming vacant property relief for more than a decade, I do not think that they are doing their best to get that property let. We should, therefore, think about that, and I encourage the Minister to look at it. I am sure that that is one of the things that she is looking at.

More broadly, the SDLP supports the reintroduction of the scheme. It is useful, albeit relatively modest, and we welcome it being brought to the Assembly.

Ms Forsythe: I thank the Minister for her prompt action in bringing this to the House. We welcome the reinstatement of the Back in Business rate support scheme. The scheme was created to incentivise business ratepayers to consider empty retail premises when looking for a business property, and it allows any new business that is occupying a long-term vacant property that has been valued as a retail unit to pay rates at the vacant rating level for two years. We all know that our high streets are under incredible pressure, with shops and restaurants closing regularly. The knock-on effect that that has on our towns is felt widely and is often devastating.

On review of the scheme, the Finance Committee learned that the majority of recipients in the most recent active period of the scheme were small, independent enterprises that were occupying units with low rateable values. The scheme made a significant difference to those businesses, which tended to be smaller and local. I welcome that incentive to help small, local businesses make a good start. A return to the initiative will support the regeneration of our high streets, while facilitating new businesses to move into their first premises and providing opportunities for existing businesses to expand. It is a welcome boost as we strive to grow our economy in Northern Ireland, especially in the current climate, when the cost of doing business poses significant challenges. We support the motion.

Mr Tennyson: I echo the support for the order and the reinstatement of the Back in Business scheme. As others have said, it is a relatively small but, nonetheless, significant policy intervention that will help to support the reinvigoration of our high streets and town centres into busy and vibrant hubs. It should, of course, be built upon and supported through a cross-Executive approach involving the regeneration responsibilities of the Department for Communities, with a role for the Department for the Economy and local councils.

Our business community has been hampered by political uncertainty in recent years, and the Back in Business scheme is, perhaps, a tangible example of that. Despite the widespread support for the scheme and the consensus on its value that is apparent in the Chamber today, it was suspended following the collapse of the Assembly in 2017 and again in March last year. During its previous period in operation, the scheme helped to support 101 new businesses, and so it begs the question about the scale of lost opportunities due to the absence of the Assembly.

There is no doubt that having the assurance of a two-year discounted rate relief will encourage new and expanding businesses to take that important next step. It is particularly important following the turbulence of the pandemic and the inflationary pressures and energy costs bearing down on our high street. However, the lead-in time for a new business is often longer than a year, and so I welcome the Minister's commitment that she will look to include this relief in a rolling multi-year Budget to give our business community the stability and certainty that it desires and requires.

The Minister is probably tired of hearing me say this in debates, but we need a fundamental root-and-branch review of rate reliefs, as agreed to by the Assembly yesterday, in order to encapsulate just some of the issues that the Chair of the Finance Committee has raised already. That is the best way to ensure that our rating system responds to business demands and to ensure that it is fair, progressive, equitable and fit for purpose in challenging economic times.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Chair of the Finance Committee and the Members who contributed to the debate.

This scheme is worth reintroducing because it can breathe new life into our high streets, after what has been a difficult time for many businesses, while, at the same time, helping traders old and new deal with the cost of doing business. Vacant commercial property is a blight on the appearance of our high streets. It undermines our towns and cities, which is something that the Assembly and Executive should address. This measure can go some way towards addressing that. Back in Business is also a good example of what we should try to do more of: strategic low-cost interventions that make a critical difference to businesses, especially in a climate of fiscal restraint.

I will pick up on a couple of the comments that Members made. Matthew O'Toole made some

observations that the Committee had raised queries about and had some responses on the fact that businesses receiving this rate relief are unable to also avail themselves of other rate reliefs. Recipients have been evaluating the outworkings of the previous iteration of it, mostly small, independent businesses. He also mentioned the rate revenue-raising consultation, the responses to which I am considering at the moment. Some 1,400 people took the time to reply to that consultation, so it is well worthwhile to consider what those people had to say about our rating system. As Mr Tennyson said, I am undertaking a strategic assessment of our rating system. It is important that it aligns with our economic vision.

Mr O'Toole specifically referenced the non-domestic vacant property rating relief, which was one of the measures that was considered as part of the rate revenue-raising consultation. We will be looking at the responses as part of the feedback on that broader piece of work. Also, Mr Tennyson commented on how this scheme fits into the broader regeneration of the high street. I agree that a cross-departmental effort is required there and that it should also involve local government. The high street task force reported back in 2022, and its recommendation relevant to the Department of Finance was in respect of the Back in Business scheme, so we have undertaken to ensure that that is put back in place.

I ask Members to support this measure and I commend the order to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 be affirmed.

The Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That the Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 be affirmed.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Minister to open the debate on the motion.

3.30 pm

Dr Archibald: The order reintroduces the rural ATM rates exemption scheme for the 2024-25 rating year. The exemption lapsed in the absence of an Executive and an Assembly in 2023, when affirmative resolution legislation could not be passed. Today's order addresses that by restoring the scheme to operation and ensuring that no liability is incurred for the lapsed period. The scheme has always been a micro-measure but has been seen as an important localised measure with the policy objective of sustaining the provision of ATMs in rural areas through the removal of any rates liability for those facilities.

I recently met representatives of high street banks, UK Finance, LINK and Cash Access UK to talk about the impact of branch closures on communities and the availability of ATMs and over-the-counter services. All of us will know that the retention of ATMs is particularly valued in rural communities that have been impacted on by branch closures, as well as by older people and low-income customers. It therefore makes sense to see what the Executive and the Assembly can do to encourage the retention of rural ATMs.

Previous research and analysis, along with feedback received during the 2019 business rates review, which was conducted just before the pandemic, confirmed that stakeholders wanted to see the scheme retained, despite the declining number of machines that were rated. I recognise, and my officials have advised the Finance Committee of this, that the legislation goes a small way towards helping the retention of specific ATMs in rural areas by extending the scheme until the end of March 2025. The scheme will continue to apply to stand-alone rural ATMs that are individually valued in the valuation list, such as separate units on main streets or completely stand-alone units. As in previous years, the scheme does not need to apply to ATMs that are located in and valued as part of banks or building societies. The value of those machines is subsumed into the overall value of that property, which is to say that they have no stand-alone rates liability. The current cost of the measure continues to be modest, at less than £50,000 in forgone rates revenue. The scheme continues to assist the retention of rural ATMs, which, as was noted in Committee, is important to many of our rural communities.

Article 1 sets out the citation, commencement and interpretation provisions. Article 2 specifies a later date of 1 April 2025 for the purposes of the definition of "relevant year" in article 42(1G) of the Rates Order 1977, with the result that the

exemption will continue until 31 March 2025. Article 3 revokes the Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2022, which had previously extended the exemption until 31 March 2023, prior to the measure's expiring in the absence of a functioning Assembly.

I look forward to Members' comments. I commend the rates order to the House.

Mr O'Toole (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): Again, I speak for the Committee for Finance about our scrutiny of the statutory rule. I thank the Minister once again for her comments.

The Committee spent considerable time discussing the policy proposal to reinstate a micro-policy in the rating system, giving a rates exemption to ATMs in a designated rural area. The policy was first considered by the Committee on 6 March 2024. At that time, members agreed to seek clarification from the Department of Finance on recipients most likely to benefit from the rates exemption. At the Committee's meeting on 20 March 2024, members noted information from the Department that highlighted the fact that the majority of recipients of the relief are banks or electronic money services companies. The Department indicated that that has been the case since the scheme was first put in place and that one aim of the scheme is to encourage banks and money services companies to keep the ATMs in their current locations.

Some members expressed concerns that a number of recipients of the exemption are banks. The majority of members, however, indicated that the proposal has merit. The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the statutory rule. SR 2024/88 was laid in the Business Office on 4 April. At the Committee's meeting on 17 April, members noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR) had not drawn any matters to do with the rule to the attention of the Committee. While members agreed to recommend that the rule be affirmed by the Assembly, further information was requested from the Department on a number of issues relating to rural ATMs, including statistics on the number of rural ATMs over the past five years, on the current location and operators of rural ATMs and on whether the Department has considered ways in which to publicise the availability of a rates rebate for rural ATMs. The Committee also agreed to request information on how many current recipients of the rates rebate for rural ATMs charge for the use of those ATMs — ie which

are the kind that charges people £1 or £2 to withdraw cash rather than the free ones.

In Committee on 8 May, members noted the geographical distribution of the current ATMs that are valued as separate rateable entries and are exempt from rates under the scheme. Members noted that the valuation approach to ATMs has significantly altered following a Supreme Court ruling in *Cardtronics UK Ltd and others versus Sykes and others*, and, as a result, the number of ATMs valued as separate entities in the valuation list has significantly reduced. However, that does not mean that the ATMs are no longer in place but that they are no longer valued separately. The Committee also noted that the rate exemption for rural ATMs is not a rebate. It is applied automatically before bills are issued according to rural wards set out in legislation and known to the Department. Therefore, it is felt that publicity is not required.

Finally, members noted that the Department does not hold data on which operators charge for ATM services. During the Committee's consideration of the rule, members noted with concern the more general decline of banking institutions and ATMs in rural areas. Members have agreed to look at the issue more closely as part of a piece of work around banking services. The Committee supports the motion to affirm.

I will now make some brief remarks in a political capacity. We obviously support what is, in cash terms, an extremely small measure but is useful nevertheless. It is vital for rural communities to keep hold of ATMs because access to cash is extremely important in all areas but particularly in rural areas. Those cash services help to support such things as small, charitable, community, sporting groups and clubs in all their activities, endeavours and fundraising. It would be unthinkable to see a further decline in the number of ATMs.

Some of what we learned in the Committee suggests that it is important that the Department, having taken this step and the fact that we are debating the legislation today, does all that it can. I welcome the fact that the Minister met UK Finance and the banks, and I would welcome an update from her on the contents of that conversation. As much as is possible should be done to really dig into the locations of rural ATMs and to be absolutely blunt and direct with all of those institutions about the availability of the rate relief. It is not a huge measure. It is a self-described micro-measure, but the fact that it exists means that it should be communicated loudly and publicly to

all of the banks so that any excuses for removing services — whether full-blown branches or ATMs — are removed. I would welcome the Minister updating us on that, including on whether there is some kind of partnership with UK Finance or some way of communicating that.

I would also suggest that, given that some of those people will be members of retail bodies, such as Retail NI or the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) — often ATMs in rural areas are in the forecourt of the Spar garage, Vivo or whatever — any communication that can be given to those entities, whether they are a bank or retail premises that might not already be availing themselves of an ATM service or might be thinking of closing one, is critical, given that the amount of money does qualify. I do not want to be too flippant about this: it is a trivial sum of money, even in constrained times, but it is not a trivial issue for rural communities.

I would also just make a point about financial services. I welcome the fact that the Minister is reaching out to organisations such as UK Finance and banks in general. We will have a debate on related matters later, around insurance services. It gets to a broader point that the Committee has agreed to look at around financial services here. We are in a particular, unique position, and we have never quite grasped it in the devolution era. Financial services are a reserved matter; they are a matter for the Treasury. I think that the Minister would agree that, in the Treasury — this is not to impugn the officials working in financial services there — as is the case with lots of things, the needs of Northern Ireland and the specific financial services picture here, including the rurality of our society, are not well understood or, frankly, a priority. We cannot expect financial services policy to be designed and tailored for this region, so we need to think hard about how we, as an Assembly and an Executive, can be front-footed and even proactive, even if the policy matter is, technically, reserved. That would involve communication with the Prudential Regulation Authority (PRA) and the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), so I genuinely welcome the fact that the Minister has already started that engagement. It is vital that she and the Finance Committee do as much as they can in that space.

Banking here is regulated by the PRA, the Bank of England and the FCA, but, obviously, our banking market is structurally different. We know that it is much more all-island, which means that it has been affected by Brexit. We also know that we have a much more rural

society and that small business is a bigger part of the economy than it is across the water. It is really critical that, in what is left of the mandate, we try, at the least, to agree a set of interventions that we can take to the people in London who make the decisions about financial services in this society and what they mean for our economy.

I wanted to make those broader points, but we support the order.

Ms Á Murphy: I support the motion, and I thank the Minister for proposing it. The statutory rule reinstates a small but significant scheme that grants a rates exemption to ATMs situated in rural wards. Owing to a change in valuation case law, the scheme now applies only to a small number of ATMs that are valued individually, such as those outside petrol stations or on main streets.

As an MLA for a rural constituency, I know all too well the essential service that ATMs provide in rural areas. Rural dwellers rely heavily on cash to access goods and services, and, in many towns and villages, ATMs are the only means of accessing cash. Many people prefer to use cash to pay for goods and services, and that personal choice must be respected. Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly difficult for rural dwellers to access cash, as towns and villages across the North lose their ATM provision.

In recent years, many of the major banks have closed their rural branches, abandoning communities and leaving them without face-to-face banking services. Lisnaskea lost its last bank branch in March, when Ulster Bank decided to withdraw from the town. That corporate decision was made in London with zero regard for the communities in south-east Fermanagh. Today, there is no 24-hour cash access in the town. The loss of that bank branch has been a huge blow not only to Lisnaskea but to the surrounding towns and villages that it has served for decades.

The cost-of-living crisis and the rise of large online retailers make it difficult for rural businesses to turn a profit. ATMs are an essential driver for economic activity on our rural main streets and have a key role in rural regeneration. The statutory rule is an important step in protecting the rural ATMs that remain, and I hope that it will act as an incentive to rural businesses to provide ATM services in the near future.

Ms Forsythe: We welcome the rates exemption for ATMs in designated rural areas. I

take the opportunity to raise awareness of the exemption to encourage more providers to consider operating ATMs in rural areas such as South Down, where I live and which I represent. Access to cash is a huge concern for people across Northern Ireland, especially in our rural communities, where you are many miles away from your bank and completely cut off when the internet or phone connections are down.

With the regularly reported closure of local banks, it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to access their personal banking and their cash. Much has been made of banking hubs, but they are not the answer for cash access, as they simply offer an over-the-counter post office service for cash withdrawal in office hours. They do not have ATMs, and they do not provide access to cash in the evenings or at weekends.

Further to my call for more access to cash is my emphasis on people's right to access their cash free of charge. In response to my question for written answer, the Finance Minister indicated that, as of the first quarter of 2023, 81% of ATMs in Northern Ireland are free to use, which, as she noted, compares favourably with 78% in Great Britain.

However, I note the extremely rural nature of Northern Ireland, and the fact that 19% of ATMs here charge people to access their own money is ridiculous. I acknowledge that the Assembly does not have legislative authority over banking, but, in the absence of that authority, I welcome all actions that we can possibly take to improve free access to cash for individuals in Northern Ireland. I am pleased to say that the Finance Committee will work on that.

I support the motion to affirm the legislation, and I take the opportunity to raise awareness of the exemption. We support the motion.

3.45 pm

Mr Tennyson: Again, I rise to very briefly put on record the Alliance Party's support for the proposed rule, which will reinstate the micro policy of applying a rates exemption to ATMs in designated rural areas. Like the previous order that we debated, this is an example of a policy that lapsed in the absence of an Assembly, and, as someone who does not really use cash very often, I have to say that I was surprised at the extent to which I was lobbied on the issue when the Assembly was down.

I welcome, however, that we are now in a position to reinstate the policy in this annual

technical vote. Having been a feature of our rating system since 2007, and having been consulted on twice since then, the exemption has a negligible impact on cost and administration, given that Land and Property Services is able to automatically apply it. However, the exemption has a hugely significant impact on our rural communities. There is, as others said, an important equality consideration in access to cash for not only our rural communities but those older people who are not necessarily digital natives.

However, figures suggest that, even with the policy in place, there continues to be a decline in the availability of rural ATMs and bank branches on our high streets. The very recent announcement that a Halifax branch in Portadown in my constituency will not reopen following a fire earlier this year is another example of that. We all have examples of loss of services in our constituencies. Whilst I appreciate that powers in this space are limited because, as others said, financial services and banking is largely a reserved issue, I encourage the Minister to continue to advocate as best she can at a UK level. That is because it appears that our policy approach in this area sometimes appears to be a carrot approach from the Assembly without there necessarily being a stick at UK level through regulation to work with industry in order to ensure the accessibility of cash and other banking services on our high streets.

I thank the Minister for tabling the motion, and I am happy to support the order.

Dr Archibald: I thank Members for their useful comments on the order and on the wider issues relating to the extension of the exemption in rural areas.

The scheme is, as things stand, worth continuing for those who live in isolated rural communities and who still depend on the availability of cash from ATMs. We all appreciate the difficulties that are encountered in those communities because of any measure that could limit the circulation of cash, and I am happy to continue this one as long as it continues to help provide some support to people and businesses in rural areas.

I will pick up on some of the comments that Members made. The policy intent is about retaining ATMs in rural areas, and Matthew and Diane referred to how some ATMs are fee charging. During the initial consultation on the measure, there was a suggestion that it should apply only to free-to-use ATMs. However, some of the feedback was that even a fee-charging

ATM is better than no ATM in a rural community. Certainly, I am of the view that it is less palatable to give a rates exemption to those who charge fees, but it is also about retaining services in a local area. I raised that issue when I met the representatives of the banking industry.

Mr O'Toole also asked about that engagement. It was about the broader issues in the concerns about the branch network and the number of closures that we have seen over recent years. It was also about how those decisions are taken and the need to ensure that communities have access to cash. We are a region that is more cash dependent. Figures from last year showed us to be the only region to have had an increase in cash withdrawals since the previous year, so it is important to ensure that communities have access to cash. Diane and Áine spoke to the importance of that in rural areas that have recently lost bank branches.

I will continue to engage with the sector on that. In the autumn, I hope to have a repeat of the round table that Minister Murphy had in the previous mandate. My officials have been engaging with the Treasury and the Financial Conduct Authority on all these issues. It is important that, collectively, we make the case for people to have the ability to access banking services.

In closing, I ask Members to support the measure and I commend the order to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 be affirmed.

Private Members' Business

Primary Care: Extreme Pressures

Mr Robinson: I beg to move

That this Assembly values the enormous contribution of those working in primary care across Northern Ireland; notes that this includes GPs, nurses, health visitors, physiotherapists, social workers and mental health practitioners; recognises that primary care is generally the first point of contact within the health service for those who become unwell; further notes the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office report on access to general practice, which found that almost one in three local practices has sought crisis support in the past four years; regrets the absence of a specific workforce strategy for general practice; believes the failure to train, recruit, retain and reward staff has limited progress toward the roll-out of multidisciplinary teams in local primary care settings; calls on the Minister of Health to provide an indemnity scheme for GPs in Northern Ireland in line with arrangements in other parts of the United Kingdom; and further calls on the Minister to increase the number of GP training places and invest in an enhanced fellowship programme for newly qualified GPs as part of an ambitious, costed and time-bound plan to grow the primary care workforce.

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

Mr Robinson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. How many Members can say that they have never fielded a call to their office from patients struggling to get through to a GP surgery? I would safely say that not one of us can. I could tell you of multiple complaints to my office. I have struggled to access GP services, my staff have struggled and my family has struggled. It is a common complaint, and it is not getting any better.

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

Forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, for starting off my contribution on what some may see as a negative, but it is an issue that dominates my

office and one that my constituents will expect and demand that I highlight on the Floor of the House. It is vital to state from the outset that we need to fix it on behalf of patients and GPs.

I will follow up my somewhat negative comment by thanking those who work in that vital sector for their tireless efforts. We must always acknowledge their commitment to the well-being of the people of the Province. Primary care is often the first point of contact in our health service, and it plays a key role in maintaining the health and resilience of our population. Professionals such as GPs, nurses, health visitors, physiotherapists, social workers and mental health practitioners form the backbone of our healthcare system. They are the spine of the health and social care team.

To put that into some context, 2,041,000 patients were registered with GP practices in Northern Ireland as of 31 March 2023, with around 200,000 general practice consultations undertaken each week in 2022-23. However, recent findings from the NI Audit Office reveal concerning trends. Almost one in three local GP practices has sought crisis support in the past four years. That alarming statistic underscores the urgent need for action. We cannot afford to overlook the challenges faced by our primary care workforce.

The report said that 1,448 GPs were registered on the Northern Ireland primary care medical performers list as of 31 March 2023 but that more than a tenth of GPs on that list left during 2022-23, with 318 GP practices in the Province as of 31 March 2023. However, of those, 39 were assessed as being at risk in the same period. On top of that, 13 contracts were handed back during 2022-23. The report detailed how general practice accounts for 5.4% of all health and social care spend in the Province, with £375 million spent on GP practices in 2022-23.

Whilst multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) are seen as a key element of transforming primary care and helping the wider healthcare system, only 8% of registered patients had access to the full range of MDTs as of March 2023. Progress on MDTs simply has not met the ambitions. MDTs are key to reversing the fortunes in general practice and wider healthcare. Working as part of a much larger team is attractive to many doctors. It means, in simple examples, such as arranging annual leave or covering for a colleague who is off sick, that there is a much broader group to carry the burden, rather than just one or two colleagues. The Department of Health has cited financial pressures as the key issue in not improving primary care. However,

the Comptroller and Auditor General was clear in his March report that, even with a lack of sufficient funding, the Department needs to explore alternative and credible options for the implementation of the MDT model over the coming years. I trust that the Minister will answer the following questions today: has he taken this recommendation on board, and will he expedite the review of the MDT project and bring a revised business case?

Other findings in the report were that pressures on general practice are driven by a growing and ageing population and that a significant number of GP practices are under severe pressure. It also found that data on activity in general practice is limited and that it is unclear whether activity is above pre-COVID levels. Published workforce data does not provide a picture of the working patterns of GPs. Nobody is questioning the commitment and integrity of our GPs or allied health professionals and the staff who support them. There are, however, legitimate unanswered questions facing the Department of Health on the current levels of accountability for activity in GP surgeries. Is the Minister confident that throughput has returned to pre-COVID levels? Has face-to-face contact increased in recent months? How many appointments are made available each day, and how does that vary from practice to practice? Are there plans for targets to be set in contracts for GP services? There is scant detail on these areas, and there is an apparent dearth of any robust or strategic approach to capturing such data for the purposes of informing future general medical services (GMS) contracts for service delivery.

A workforce strategy is a cornerstone of any successful healthcare system. Regrettably, the Province lacks a specific strategy tailored to general practice. Without a clear road map, we risk stagnation and missed opportunities for improvement. Recruitment, training, retention and reward mechanisms are crucial components of workforce development. The Department of Health needs to do more to incentivise newly trained GPs and, indeed, to incentivise to stay those with experience who are considering walking away from the profession. This means ensuring that they have the space and opportunity to pursue professional aspirations. It means fair remuneration for the work that they do, and it requires a workforce strategy that practically acknowledges the need for flexibility when it comes to longer-term fostering and guaranteed leave.

The recent Royal College of General Practitioners Northern Ireland (RCGPNI)

strategy to tackle GP workforce retention and 'A Workforce Fit for the Future' had similar concerning findings. The average number of registered patients per practice has increased by around 17% from 5,500 to 6,439 since 2014. This increasing demand suggests the need for a further expansion in GP training places into the future. Whilst training more GPs is important, so is ensuring that those who qualify remain here and forge a career in primary care across Northern Ireland. The drain of expertise to other jurisdictions needs to be stemmed. An increasing number of early-career GPs who have trained in the Province are not taking up posts here, and, according to the recent RCGPNI survey, 29% of GPs stated that they would be fairly or very unlikely to be working in general practice in the Province in five years' time.

Some 60% said that they had found it fairly or very difficult to recruit GPs to their practice in the past year.

4.00 pm

The report went further and said that fellowships were not available for young GPs working in substantive posts unlike in other parts of the UK, where weekly opportunities exist to further develop clinical aspirations. Many of the GPs surveyed reported practice infrastructure that was not fit for purpose, which led to poor working conditions, and the lack of a functioning secondary care service was highlighted as exacerbating GP workloads and patient demand. Also, there was a perception among many GPs that little help was available for practices until they reached the verge of collapse. Notably, only one of the practice contract hand-backs was in an area where an MDT model was in place.

It is welcome that £5 million has been made available to help cover the cost of insuring GPs against claims, hopefully aligning with arrangements in other parts of the UK. That will, in the short term, provide much-needed support and security for our front-line healthcare providers, and we can only hope that it will help to persuade graduates to work in the Province rather than being lost to across the border. It is certainly a welcome start, and it is one that we hope will provide a longer-term solution.

Added to the many other problems, the primary care estate is not in good shape. Technology needs to be embraced and better utilised, whilst being mindful of the quality impacts on certain protected groups. The morning rush to obtain an appointment by phoning the practice is

utterly unacceptable for a modern service, and new ways need to be provided. That could include the ability to seek assistance and obtain an appointment online via mobile phone. Surely, there is no reason why primary care and other areas of public services, such as MOT booking, should be in any way less equipped for the modern world than business and retail.

It is clear from the two reports that primary care in Northern Ireland has reached crisis point. We have fewer GP practices than 10 years ago, GP contracts are being handed back and a large cohort of trained GPs are choosing not to work in primary care or are working very limited hours because of the stress involved and a lack of support. All of that points to a model of general practice that is on its knees, and without concerted action —

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

Mr Robinson: — the situation will inevitably worsen as our ageing population grows.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call Colin McGrath to move the amendment.

Mr McGrath: I beg to move

Leave out all after "primary care settings;" and insert:

"calls on the Minister of Health to publish a timescale for the full implementation of multidisciplinary teams across the North; and further calls on the Minister of Health to provide an indemnity scheme for GPs in Northern Ireland in line with arrangements in other parts of the United Kingdom; and calls on the Minister to increase the number of GP training places and invest in an enhanced fellowship programme for newly qualified GPs as part of an ambitious, costed and time-bound plan to grow the primary care workforce."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you. The proposer of the amendment has 10 minutes to speak, and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McGrath: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

"The stark options facing the HSC system are either to resist change and see services deteriorate to the point of collapse over time, or to embrace transformation and work to

create a modern, sustainable service that is properly equipped to help people stay as healthy as possible and to provide them with the right type of care when they need it."

Those words formed part of Professor Bengoa's report eight years ago, and, prophetically, I believe that they have come to pass. We are seeing the collapse of multiple services and increasing waiting lists across the health sector. It is a deeply worrying time. The extreme pressures that we face are evidenced most clearly in primary care. The motion is an important opportunity for us to discuss these issues. The amendment that the SDLP is proposing is a minor one that we believe complements and strengthens the DUP motion. The focus of our amendment is to shine a spotlight on the importance of the multidisciplinary teams. The provision of MDTs was an outworking of the Bengoa report in 2016 and was first piloted in Down and Derry in 2018.

Primary care in the North has undergone significant operational change in a short time. On top of the operational change, we have witnessed an incredibly turbulent time for those working in primary care, which only intensified with the emergence of COVID-19. As a result, over time, we have seen a fresh focus, though perhaps not enough of a focus, on prevention and health promotion, and a reorientation of the health system away from treatment solely in hospitals towards the delivery of care in the right place for the patient. That can often be in the community or, as we are seeing even more now, at home.

Multidisciplinary teams have emerged out of that focus. This new way of delivering primary care brings together GPs, pharmacists, district nurses, health visitors, allied health professionals, social workers, advanced nurse practitioners, physician associates and others. There is no doubt that, where multidisciplinary teams have been implemented fully, successful health outcomes have followed. I see it in the Down area in practices where MDTs have been fully implemented. I have been lucky to visit some of the MDT practices in my community to see the benefits not just for the patients who go to them but for the staff who work in those units.

MDTs establish a truly holistic way of delivering primary care. With the development of modern technology, the ideal is that members of the public will find it easier to book an appointment with their local practice and get the right care at the right time. That is the ideal, but the present reality is different. Partial implementation of MDTs across the North has resulted in unintended consequences by creating new

health inequalities. Of the 17 GP federations across Northern Ireland, only one — the Down federation — has had a full complement of MDTs since the inception of this new way of delivering care. That is not because it is my local area, I promise, but we have supported the moves to deliver MDTs. I have been proud to host in the Down area the pilot for across the North. It is distinctly worrying that 10 of the 17 GP federation areas in the North have no MDTs at all. That creates the unintended consequences that I mentioned: the creation of health inequalities.

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with him about MDTs. As a representative of a rural constituency, the Member knows the importance of having access to the full complement of healthcare staff in a primary care setting. It is disappointing that we have not had the full roll-out, despite some previous announcements about MDT allocations.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for her intervention. It strengthens the argument about how we need to see that roll-out across all areas so that everybody can access the full range of services on an equal basis. The people of Fermanagh are just as entitled to that as the people of Down.

It leaves us in a situation in which our health is affected by where we are born, where we live and work, and our age. When there is an imbalance in the distribution of resources and services, we see that imbalance in health outcomes. As a result, those living in areas of greater deprivation are often at risk of suffering from poor health outcomes. General practice is ideally placed to help to counter that and address the imbalance.

Be under no illusion: contrary to what some said yesterday, the SDLP is not criticising for the sake of it. This is not about apportioning blame. Rather, we must recognise the reality of where we find ourselves and seek the right solution. That is the purpose of the amendment. I say that because nobody could be in any doubt as to the Health Minister's commitment to the important issue of reducing the pressures on primary care and to the roll-out of multidisciplinary teams specifically. I know that his commitment has been unwavering, and I am not just bigging him up so that he compliments me in his remarks. *[Laughter.]* I know that the Minister offers that support to MDTs. We must, however, be cognisant of those working in our healthcare sector, because, for them, the reality is that they are suffering from burnout or are not far from it.

With more contracts being handed back by GPs, and health trusts then having to take over control, it is clear that that a paradigm shift is required, both operationally and culturally, in our delivery of primary care. Multidisciplinary teams are ideally placed to deliver that change. Operationally, the process of triage by reception staff is important for placing the patient with the most appropriate mental health, physical or social care needs within the MDT profession at the right time. We know that, culturally, some members of the public are still reluctant to speak to GP reception staff and want only to speak to their GP. That is understandable, but it places another operational layer on our GPs, who are already struggling.

We are living in a post-pandemic world, and that presents new opportunities and new challenges. Today, more than ever, we need to unlock the potential of the health service to meet the needs of patients. Today, more than ever, we need to support our general practitioners to ensure that not only do we retain staff but we make the career path attractive for future generations, which the proposer of the motion referenced.

The Royal College of General Practitioners Northern Ireland recently published 'A Workforce Fit for the Future'. In that document, we hear doctors express the factors that are most important to them, the top six of which are work-life balance; income; workload; practice stability; the ability to pursue a GP role with special interests; and a practice with MDTs. It is important to note that the implementation of MDTs can lead to enhanced practice stability, so much so that, in practices that have a full complement of MDTs, only one contract has been handed back. When that happened, the trust was able to put in place the necessary structures to reduce patient disruption. Access to MDTs was also factored into GPs' decisions to remain working. The evidence could not be clearer: MDTs are essential for the present and future of our health service, and they must be fully rolled out.

I appeal to the Minister to provide an assessment of the impact that the Finance Minister's proposed Budget settlement will have on our ability to roll out multidisciplinary teams. We know that their roll-out is needed for the future stability of primary care here and that we must get the right finance delivered to the Department of Health in order to be able to deliver the transformation that will strengthen our health service and make sure that it is indeed fit for the future.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the proposer and his colleague for tabling the motion. It is fair, and not an exaggeration, to say that our health service is on its knees. Every corner of the system is under severe pressure, and staff are working in the most challenging and, too often, unsafe circumstances. Every day that that situation continues, patients get sicker and need more care, and there is less capacity to provide what is required. Something has to give.

We hail the benefits of early intervention and prevention in healthcare, as they undoubtedly promote better patient outcomes and ensure that people live well for longer. Although we know that people across the North are living longer, many live with a range of health conditions and languish, with a very poor quality of life, on waiting lists. Sadly, many even die while on waiting lists.

We are in crisis management mode, trying to put money into our health service at the latter stages of a patient's journey — in some cases, when it is already far too late — when more care is needed, which costs more and adds to the already colossal pressure that is on our health service. To turn the ship around, we need to focus our efforts upstream on the first point of contact for patients, which is primary care. A properly resourced primary care service is critical if we want to transform our health service and improve the health of our communities. There is not one Member in the Chamber who has not had constituents come to them for help because they have been unable to get an appointment with their GP. That situation is worsening by the day. Just last week, another GP practice in my constituency announced that it will not renew its contract, owing to the huge pressure that it faces to deliver that important service. That is a very difficult decision for any GP to have to make. We heard very clearly at the recent Royal College of General Practitioners event that that is not a decision that any GP wants to take.

At the Health Committee, we heard just how stark that picture is from the royal college and the British Medical Association (BMA). GPs are experiencing unprecedented pressures as demand for their services grows but the capacity to meet that demand declines because many GPs are leaving the profession prematurely.

4.15 pm

There is a real difficulty in attracting new doctors to choose general practice as a career

that they want to come to, with much more attractive opportunities in the South, in Britain and overseas with much better pay and conditions. Without a GP workforce, we simply do not have a fit-for-purpose GP service. The impact of that on patients, staff and the health and social care system as a whole is far-reaching. General practice is often referred to as the "front door" of the health service, and every person in our communities will rely on their care at some stage in their life. That is why it is vital that they are supported.

The rolling-out of multidisciplinary teams and addressing indemnity are two of the most important issues, and a permanent solution to both would take enormous strain off the entire healthcare system. A GP practice with a full complement MDT, working with nurses, social workers, Community Pharmacy and mental health practitioners, can bring care back into the community and, crucially, will be able to treat a variety of health, mental health and social issues, which will improve patients' health outcomes while alleviating the pressures on the health system overall and utilising the broad range of skills, knowledge and expertise that we have in spades across our statutory services and, equally importantly, in the community and voluntary sector. Across the North, we have a skilled, experienced and agile community and voluntary sector that already provides invaluable support and services to some of the most vulnerable people in our communities who, without that sector, would have none of the services or facilities that are critical for their needs. It is absolutely essential that the community and voluntary sector is an integral part of any future roll-out of MDTs.

To conclude, it is fair to say that there is no doubt that the financial picture for the incoming Budget is challenging, but we cannot afford to stand still or do nothing. We need to see a plan for the Budget and a workforce plan, because that will support primary care and it will support staff in the jobs that they have set out to do — they are vocations — but it will also meet the growing needs of patients and the people we represent.

Miss McAllister: I thank the proposer of the motion for tabling it. We are happy to support the motion and the SDLP amendment. Like many Members in the Chamber, my constituency office is inundated with requests from constituents about access to their GP. That is no surprise, because the Royal College of General Practitioners has said that, in the last month, at least 128,000 patients have been impacted by practices handing contracts back or closing.

We all know that access to GP services is the number-one issue that our constituents raise with us, but we also know that there are many reasons why they struggle to get access. I want to explore a couple of those reasons. Primary care encompasses general practice, community care, mental health and dental care and a large number of other services that represent people's first point of contact with the health service. I understand that the motion focuses on GP services, but I want to touch on the others a little, and my colleague will focus on the workforce challenges.

I want to focus specifically on the funding issues that cause the instability, because we hear about that every day in our capacity as health spokespeople for our parties. There is a significant disparity between the level of service provided by primary care and general practice and the funding that they receive from the Department of Health. The Royal College of General Practitioners has highlighted that primary care represents 95% of the care provided to the population across a lifetime, but, despite that, primary care received only 5.4% of the Health budget in 2022-23.

We have all met numerous representatives from across the primary care sector, and they all report that the current level of funding is unsustainable. Unfortunately, the consequences of that are clear. Since March 2022, as many Members have mentioned, 25 practices have handed their contracts back to the Department. Ninety-eight practices have sought crisis support in the last four years, which is one in three practices in Northern Ireland. With existing issues around recruitment, training, conditions and pay, it is no surprise that the general practice workforce is choosing to practise elsewhere.

It is not just limited to general practice: I am sure that other Members will agree that they hear from constituents that NHS dentistry is also a problem. I note that there was an announcement of support for general dental services (GDS) at the beginning of the month. While the asks of the motion are about general practice, I ask the Minister whether he considers that announcement premature, given that some business cases are not approved and may not be approved until as late as August. Hopefully, the Minister will address that, but I recognise that the motion focuses on general practice.

The contract agreement announced last week was undoubtedly a positive step. The BMA committee achieved a significant win, and I congratulate it on all the work that it has done

over the past few years. The £5 million to cover indemnity costs for one year must be welcomed; indeed, we have all lobbied the Minister in our Committee capacity and as party representatives. As the BMA stated, however, the progress that has been made needs to continue past the first year. We need a long-term indemnity solution. It is crucial that we get that right and that support is forthcoming.

Primary care often represents a person's first point of contact with the health service. It is no secret that the Health Minister has many competing requests for funding. However, funding for primary care is an investment in the health service as a whole. GPs can and do provide more relief for A&E services. They can help to enable early intervention, which will inevitably ease pressures on waiting lists and lead to better outcomes for patients. Dental care is crucial for oral health and can play a significant role in the detection of some cancers. Health visitors and social workers provide important support for vulnerable members of our community. As the roll-out of multidisciplinary teams continues across Northern Ireland, we will see even more benefits to the overall primary care sector in identifying any early health interventions that are required.

A multidisciplinary team will soon come to north Belfast, and I welcome that, but I want to raise the issue of capacity in general practice for those MDTs. Capacity in space and location is another issue that the Minister must consider.

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

Miss McAllister: I am happy to support the amendment and the motion. I hope that the Minister will answer the questions about primary dental care.

Mr Chambers: Every opportunity to talk about the challenges facing our health service is welcome, even if, occasionally, as today, a number of the points raised are out of date. I do not make that comment to point-score, but it is a fact that the motion and some of what it refers to may be coming a month too late. The recent agreement on the general medical services (GMS) contract and, especially, the announcements on interim payments for GP indemnity have been warmly welcomed by many of the GPs to whom I have spoken over recent weeks. Similarly, the direction of travel of shifting some services back into primary care rather than out of it, such as the recent announcement on vasectomy services, has

reinforced confidence and has served as a useful illustration of what can be done with the right mindset.

It is fair to describe primary care as the cornerstone of our health service, especially given that 90% of all contacts with the health system locally take place at that level. There is no doubt that it is the most cost-effective means of delivering high-quality care while being the one that is most valued by the patient. It also remains the most accessible element of the health service, with many patients remaining under the care of GPs and other general practice staff whom they have come to know over many years. Of course, there are undoubted challenges with GP access. While it is a mixed bag, with some patients seeing little, if any, diminution of access, there is no denying that, for too many others, it is becoming increasingly difficult even to get through to practices to make an appointment.

Before the latest collapse of the Executive in late 2022, seeking to improve access and remove the unnecessary bureaucratic burden on GP practices was being given significant focus. Unfortunately, as with so many other services, patients really lost out during the subsequent political and budgetary impasse. Nevertheless, it is probably fair to say that there is now greater cross-party recognition of the contribution made by the various staff who work across primary care.

Unfortunately, the rhetoric of supporting and investing in primary care was not always demonstrated previously. For instance, the proposers of the motion rightly talk about GP training places, believing that:

"the failure to train, recruit, retain and reward staff has limited progress toward the roll-out of multidisciplinary teams in local primary care settings".

That is absolutely right, but those Members show no regard for their party's culpability in the matter. Theirs is the party that held the Health portfolio for five years from 2011 until 2016, when, instead of investing in staff training places, it implemented swingeing cuts. It is a fact that the root cause of the problems in the health service can be traced back to decisions that were made a decade ago.

Ideally, I would not be standing here today making such points, but, ultimately we should not allow MLAs from whatever party to try to present an alternative version of the truth. I see no reference in the motion to the fact that, a number of years ago, Robin Swann decided to

proceed at risk, in the context of no budgetary cover, to increase the number of local GP training places to 121. Whilst that might be an inconvenient fact for the proposers of the motion, it is an increase of 86% since 2015-16. Of course, several other points were raised in the motion that are equally distorted.

The largest elephant in the room, however, has to be what the motion calls for and how that compares with the decision that was made on the Budget barely a few weeks ago. The Minister and his officials have been clear with the Health Committee over recent weeks and months that further MDT roll-out is their top priority and that, when it comes to transformation, some additional investment is needed in staff and buildings. Just over two years ago, the Minister announced the next planned expansion for the three proposed GP federations for the MDT programme in north Belfast, south-west Fermanagh and Omagh, and east Antrim.

In supporting the motion, I recognise that my party will be acknowledging achievements that Minister Swann has already made and that it will seek uplifts in the health budget to fully fund any of the motion's outstanding aspirations.

Mrs Dillon: The motion rightly emphasises the invaluable contributions of those working in primary care across the North, but attention also needs to be drawn to the interconnectedness of primary and social care services, both of which are essential pillars of our healthcare system. Primary care providers, including our GPs, nurses, mental health practitioners and our community pharmacy, play a crucial role in addressing our communities' healthcare needs. However, it is vital to recognise that many individuals who require primary care services also have complex social care needs, and that must be addressed in order to ensure holistic well-being.

The challenges that primary care services face, including the strain on local practices that seek crisis support, must not be underestimated. Those challenges are often exacerbated by social determinants of health, such as poverty, homelessness and social isolation, which can impact on an individual's ability to access and engage with healthcare services effectively. I made that point at a meeting today with the strategic planning and performance group (SPPG). It is not a case that people are hard to reach; it is that services are difficult to access for some people. We need to ensure that we deliver services in the places where people need them, and that is in their communities, where they can easily access them.

The broader social care landscape must be addressed, and that includes investing in community-based support services, such as social work, physiotherapy and health visiting, which are essential components of a comprehensive primary care system. In order to truly enhance primary care provision, it is vital that we see an increase in social prescribing and, crucially, the ability of health and social care professionals to develop links with early support services — again, it is about the early intervention and prevention services — to protect our people and keep them well, rather than keep them sick. Social prescribers can help to reach more marginalised and vulnerable groups in our communities, and that could have a transformative impact on health inequalities and improve outcomes for the health of our people.

I appreciate that the Minister has worked with GPs in recent times to deal with the indemnity issue, and he has come to some interim solutions for that, but we need a long-term solution.

Likewise, it is vital that the Department works closely with our community pharmacists and invests in a sustainable funding model to protect that service.

4.30 pm

We must not forget the importance of integrating social care into our primary care strategies, recognising that health and well-being are intrinsically linked to social factors. It is only by doing that that we will genuinely improve health outcomes for all, particularly those in our marginalised and deprived communities.

Mrs Erskine: Hardly a week goes by in which someone does not get in touch with me or my constituency office to talk about GP services. The common refrain is that it is difficult to get through on the phone to get an appointment. That is perhaps symptomatic of the pressure and problems behind the scenes, which are the cause and what we need to deal with.

It is important that we pay tribute to the vast contribution made by our GP and primary care staff across Northern Ireland. I pay tribute to my GP practice and thank it for all the work that it does alongside the excellent community pharmacy provision in my area. My practice, Brookeborough and Tempo Primary Care Services, was one of 13 practices that had to hand back its contract in 2022-23. The Western Trust stepped in to provide a service for the

some 8,000 patients on the books. We have already seen practices in my constituency close their doors. Rosslea surgery, for example, closed a number of years ago.

How is that sustainable? In Northern Ireland, as of March 2023, there were 317 active GP practices — a reduction of 33, equating to 9%, since 2014. Yet, the average number of registered patients per practice has increased by around 17% since 2014. It is clear that primary care in Northern Ireland has reached crisis point. We now have fewer GP practices than we did 10 years ago. The practices that are operating are not evenly distributed across the Province. GP contracts are being handed back with increasing frequency. The roll-out of multidisciplinary teams has stalled. Many patients are frustrated with the phone triage service and have been unable to secure timely access to care. Contracts for GP services still do not contain performance targets. A large cohort of trained GPs are choosing not to work in primary care, because of the stress involved and a lack of support. The list goes on.

Those problems will not be addressed overnight. However, the importance of delivering real change cannot be overstated. Previous evidence shows that over 90% of NHS contracts are with GPs, yet they account for only 5.4% of the health and social care spend in Northern Ireland. Training more GPs is a key pillar of the DUP's five-point plan, but so too is ensuring that those who qualify remain here and forge a career in primary care across Northern Ireland. The drain of expertise to other jurisdictions needs to be stemmed. Recruitment and retention are two sides of the same coin. The Department of Health needs to do more to incentivise newly trained GPs, and, indeed, those with experience who are considering walking away from the profession, to stay. That is particularly true when you look at rural areas and the need to incentivise young trainees and GPs to stay in the likes of Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

I welcome the Department of Health's announcement of an agreement on the general medical services contract with GPs for 2024-25. However, I heard more detail on that through the media, as I travelled to Stormont, than I did from the Minister, either through a written ministerial statement or in the Chamber.

Mr Brooks: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Erskine: Yes.

Mr Brooks: Does the Member agree with me that, given the broad range of ministerial statements on a number of important issues, it is regrettable that the Minister did not bring this issue to the Assembly via a written or oral ministerial statement?

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

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree. This is a huge issue that all our constituency offices deal with. It is regrettable that it was not brought to the Chamber in order for us to look at it fully.

Progress towards addressing the long-standing lack of indemnity provision for GPs is welcome. However, the uplift in funding between practices is linked to annual contractual arrangements, and there is still a need to pursue and agree a long-term solution. Furthermore, we understand the desire for GP practices to have certainty on cash flow. Equally, that needs to be balanced with ensuring that GPs are accountable for their performance against clinical indicators for the various illnesses and conditions that they manage. Cutting ties with the equality and outcomes framework in the current GMS contract has raised concern in that regard, particularly given that the new Northern Ireland assurance framework does not seem to have been finalised ahead of agreement being reached between the BMA and the Department on this year's settlement. Can the public be confident that all practices are operating services at the same standard when those outcomes are not being recorded?

For too long, "Budget issues" and "Pressures" have been the cry and the reason behind not moving to a sustainable solution. "Stabilisation should come first", is what I have heard, but waiting around for stabilisation is clearly not working, and failure to act will see the complete collapse of our primary care, with a domino effect across the health service. Therefore, I thank my colleagues for tabling the motion. We will support it and the amendment.

Mr Donnelly: I thank my DUP Health Committee colleagues, Mrs Dodds and Mr Robinson, for tabling the motion and my SDLP Health Committee colleague, Colin McGrath, for his amendment. Alliance will support the motion and the amendment, as mentioned. Some of the context has already been described. Certainly, Alan pointed out the many practices that have sought crisis support over the past couple of years. In our areas, as we heard from across the Chamber today, we all know of

practices in crisis that have been struggling or have closed.

The motion presents an opportunity to acknowledge the valuable role that is played by primary care workers in Northern Ireland. As it rightly states, primary care is normally the first point of contact in the wider health service for people who are unwell, and it encompasses many areas including pharmacy, social work, mental health and physiotherapy, to name a few. One of the issues that the Health Committee picked up on was the impact that waiting lists have had on general practice, as was mentioned. We heard that up to 20% of the workload of GPs is affected by people who are on our extremely long waiting lists here in Northern Ireland.

I want to focus on a couple of issues, one of which is the importance of our workforce and, especially, the need for a workforce strategy. It is welcome that the Minister is retaining the additional number of GP training places at 121, which was agreed two years ago, but the Minister and the Department need to go further. A commitment to a workforce plan for general practice would be an important step forward, particularly one that includes an intervention to make general practice positions in Northern Ireland more attractive to boost recruitment and an intervention to provide support to our existing workforce at all stages of their careers. We have heard from GPs — time and time again — that we need more GPs in general practice in Northern Ireland. Urgent action needs to be taken to retain the GP training cohort that finishes in August. That will require a commitment to funding a fellowship scheme across Northern Ireland, but it is also necessary for us to compete better with other parts of the UK, as well as the Republic of Ireland, which is particularly important since the South currently provides more favourable conditions for GPs due to the higher salaries and more favourable work-life balance. Until we address specific conditions here, which are very different from those in GB — due to circumstances already mentioned — we will not have the necessary conditions for a stable primary care workforce.

I also want to discuss MDTs, which have been well mentioned in the debate. They are a central aspect of the 'Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together' report, which envisaged a 10-year approach to transforming health and social care, but progress in implementing MDTs has been delayed by budgetary and staffing constraints and, of course, political instability. Of the 17 GP federation areas, only one has introduced a full MDT in the four years since the launch of the

aforementioned report. The evidence in support of MDTs is clear, as we heard from Members who have spoken already. According to data from the Department, 62% of MDT patients are treated entirely within primary care, meaning that there is no need for onward referral.

MDTs provide a key stabilising factor for practices in crisis. That is evidenced by the fact that, in a presentation to the strategic planning and performance group (SPPG), 83% of the 18 practice contract hand-backs that occurred from March 2022 to November 2023 were in areas with no MDT allocation. The remaining 17 were in areas where only a partial MDT was in place. It is for those reasons that we need an urgent timescale for the full implementation of MDTs across Northern Ireland. I welcome the planned roll-out, particularly in East Antrim. The call for that is strengthened in the amendment.

It has never been more important to see vital changes to how primary care operates in Northern Ireland to support our workforce and deliver for patients, including through the implementation of the MDTs, in line with previous recommendations and commitments. When I speak to GPs, they mention to me that core funding needs to increase for general practice. The recent GMS contract agreed for this year is a good starting point. However, more is needed to prevent GP practices from failing. That would mean that we would have more GPs, which would make general practice more viable for GPs to commit to.

The expansion of MDTs is vital. Although it will not be a magic bullet, it will maintain the level playing field between practices that have MDTs and those that do not, which will equalise the delivery of healthcare across Northern Ireland.

Ms Flynn: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I am happy to support the motion and the SDLP's amendment. It is important to acknowledge at the outset that, as mentioned by other Members, primary care includes community pharmacists as well as our GPs, nurses, mental health practitioners, social workers and health visitors, who all play such a crucial part in providing healthcare for the public in our local communities.

I cannot complain about the care that I have received from my local GP surgery in west Belfast, Ballyowen, or my local pharmacy, Coopers. They have been dealing with me and my family for years, and I do not have any complaints. I had my wee son Torin a year-and-a-half ago, so the health visitor has been coming and going to visit us, and I cannot fault any of the care that I have received. However, I

am conscious that not everyone has had the same experience. Given the pressures outlined in the motion and the amendment, different GP practices, pharmacies, health visitors and all the rest will feel different types of pressure. That will have an impact in that not everyone will have the same experience when it comes to how many phone calls it takes to get through to the local surgery or how long they have to wait to see a GP or a health professional. It is important to note the positive experiences that people are having. It has been said by all the Members who have spoken that no one is taking away from all the brilliant work that GPs and health professionals in primary care carry out. However, no one is in denial over the massive pressure that they are under. Hopefully, we can help to support them.

Over the past number of weeks, we have received briefings at the Health Committee, and MLAs have been receiving emails from GP surgeries and practices from right across the North. To be fair, from the emails that we are getting, we can sense the stress and exhaustion that exists: they have highlighted the different pressures that they are genuinely under. The Minister will be aware of all that. Some of the emails tell us, in their own words, that primary care and general practice are at the point of failure and are failing because of the strain that they are under. They talk about widespread destabilisation and, as we have heard, the increasing number of practices that have had to hand back their contracts, which is linked to there not being enough investment in the workforce. Those are the same issues that cut right across all the problems that we have across the health system at the moment.

There is no point in listing the Members, but Alan, Colin, Danny and most of the Members who have spoken mentioned the number of practices that have closed. There is the really stark statistic that one third of practices are in receipt of additional support and intervention from the crisis team. That is a really high number.

It is really worrying that a third of all of the practices that we have in the small place that we live in are getting crisis support from that specialised team.

4.45 pm

There is also the problem of all of the GPs who are leaving. As we know, a lot of them are going South for better pay and conditions. The arguments that have been made in the debate are ones that we receive directly from the

general practices and GPs. I am sure that the Minister is across all of the detail already. It is about what we can do to help the situation.

Everyone has touched on the MDTs issue. It is a really worrying postcode lottery. The fact is that, of the 17 federations, only one has the full complement of staff. The intention is there to expand on that, but it is not good enough to expand it from one GP federation to three: it needs to be across all 17. I know that, in an ideal world, with an ideal budget, the Minister would do that, but it is so unfair to leave certain people —

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

Ms Flynn: — in a postcode lottery, where one GP surgery has an MDT and the other does not. Hopefully, with today's motion and the amendment, we will see some progress on those issues.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Justin McNulty is not in his place. I call Gerry Carroll.

Mr Carroll: Our primary carers face an unacceptable amount of pressure without the resources to address it. While demand continues to escalate and the workforce is becoming more and more depleted, the real-terms funding cuts in general practice have created an unmanageable burden. To neglect and abandon the people who are holding up the foundation of our health service is cruel and unacceptable. The crisis has, unfortunately, been building for many years, and the necessary action to address the scenario has not been taken. It should not be surprising that the pressure has contributed to such poor retention in GP health services, with over one in 10 doctors leaving the sector in the past year.

Privatisation and austerity measures have eroded the capacity of our healthcare system to function more generally. We need to look at erasing the market principles that have been forced on health services. We should stop treating GPs as business owners and let them be doctors. It would be beneficial for the Assembly to consider the Cuban healthcare model, which has the highest doctor density in the world. It focuses on the needs-based allocation of carers to communities and has a comprehensive state-backed system that does not allow an extreme financial and workload burden to be placed on its workers. It has already eradicated polio, malaria and tetanus, and I believe that it is the only country in the world that has eliminated the mother-to-child

transmission of HIV. Dr Clare Wenham of the London School of Economics and Political Science asked why it is not promoted as a great case study. I suggest that, as with most things, it is probably down to politics.

In a reversal of trends across the world, Cuba tends to send its doctors across the world when crises emerge, be they natural, viral or whatever. To serve a population of 11 million people, the country has 90,000 doctors. That is eight for every 1,000 citizens, which is more than double the rates in the USA and in the UK, which are 2.5 doctors per 1,000 people and 2.7 doctors per 1,000 people respectively. Cuba also has a preventative model that stops people getting ill, rather than treating them when they are unwell. We need to adopt more of that approach to stop the car at the top of the hill, rather than intervening when it has crashed at the bottom. Too often, our health system tries to play catch-up with people's health when it should intervene at a much earlier stage.

We also need to talk about barriers to studying medicine and, thus, to people becoming doctors. The applicant pool for medical degrees is far too small. In 2017, the BMA reported that more than nine in every 10 medical students in the North were ex-grammar-school pupils. There is nothing wrong with that generally — I am a former grammar-school pupil — but the issue of class needs to be added into the question. The medical profession generally needs to represent the society that it serves. It cannot be the sole preserve of middle-class and upper-class kids. When university fees amount to almost £5,000 a year for four years, that basically sends a message to working-class kids that they need not apply to study medicine, and that is completely unacceptable.

Recognition of our healthcare practitioners is not enough. It does not recruit and improve the retention of GPs. Our system needs complete transformation in order for them to do more than just survive the pressures of their day-to-day work. We need our Executive to supply a health budget that will mend our health service. It needs at least a 6% increase each year just to stand still, and that is completely unacceptable.

GP contracts need to be addressed. We need to start to treat them as GPs and public-sector workers rather than private-sector businesses. That would take the pressure off them when it comes to insurance and other costs and would also allow care, rather than making money in some cases, to be the main factor.

It would be remiss of me not to mention junior doctors as well. I believe that a motion on that is coming up next week. If we are to have a sustainable GP and healthcare sector in the months and years to come, we need to pay them what they are demanding and what they are owed.

Mr McNulty: I support the motion, as well as the amendment from my party, the SDLP. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion today. I regularly visit Daisy Hill Hospital to speak with staff and patients in the hospital corridors. I also visit Craigavon Area Hospital, and there the outworkings of the crisis in primary care can be seen plainly at first hand. Far too many people present at accident and emergency departments because they cannot get appointments with their GP, because their GP appointments are delayed, as a consequence of which there are health impacts, or because they have just given up and do not go to see their GP. The health impacts are then exacerbated. Far too many people are lined up head to toe on trolleys and chairs in hospital corridors, waiting for prescriptions to be dispensed. They are often waiting to receive what is essentially primary care because they cannot get an appointment with their GP.

I do not for a second blame general practitioners for the crisis in primary care: far from it. GPs and their staff are doing what they can with the resources available to them. Unfortunately, they suffer from poor management and a lack of ambition from the health establishment. Take, for example, the long overdue health hub in my constituency. The development of the hub in Newry was announced in 2013. It was recommended for fast-tracking and was expected to be operational by 2016. Eight years on from that expected opening date, not a single sod has been turned on the site.

I have lobbied extensively on the issue, and although there are always unforeseen project issues, I neither understand nor accept that it is reasonable for people in my constituency to wait any longer for a health hub that was promised over 10 years ago. Is it any wonder that the people of Newry, south Armagh and south Down believe that they are always the last to get and the first to lose? I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion today, but we need to get the basics right. Access to health services is a critical issue for the people whom I represent, and they have a right to expect that promises made will be promises kept.

For the Mullaghbawn GP surgery in south Armagh, I particularly welcome the component of the motion that calls for the extension of GP indemnity insurance to the North, in line with arrangements in Britain. The heart of the motion is correct, in that it identifies and seeks to remove the burdens and barriers faced by primary care practitioners. My family's local GP surgery in Mullaghbawn has experienced tremendous difficulty recruiting a managing GP after the departure of the long-standing local doctors in the practice. Dr Deane and Dr Maguire left a lasting legacy of care and compassion for their patients, and they are missed by all, as is their predecessor, Dr Smyth.

In my efforts to secure a replacement GP in Mullaghbawn, I advocated special incentives to entice an appropriate managing GP to the surgery, but those calls largely fell on deaf ears, with the health authorities seemingly preferring to stick to established policy rather than act innovatively. If we are serious about confronting the challenges in primary care, it is imperative that we recognise that doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result is the essence of insanity. I add my voice to the calls on the Minister of Health to provide an ambitious vision for growing the primary care workforce.

I will finish by paying tribute to the staff and clinicians in GP surgeries who are overwhelmed by the demand. I know from my own doctors in Newry, Dr McVerry, Dr McGee and Dr Farnon in the Cornmarket surgery. When I visit, the phones are ringing incessantly, machine gun-style. I wonder how on earth they cope with the relentless, incessant pressure. I thank those clinicians and their staff: well done, and keep going.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call the Minister of Health to respond to the debate. Minister, you have up to 15 minutes.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I welcome the debate today and the opportunity to recognise and pay tribute once again to the vital role played by primary care as part of our health and social care system. We have heard from many Members about matters such as community provision, community pharmacy and waiting lists, and that is recognition that no part of our health and social care system stands alone in regard to how we want to support all our patients or where pressures are felt.

Many Members who spoke today acknowledged the enormous contribution made by GPs, their practice teams and, indeed, the

other health and social care professionals who, together, make up the primary care workforce. I therefore understand the ongoing challenges that patients and GPs, along with their teams, face, not least the impact of increasing demand and the resultant burgeoning workloads.

The fact that 26 general practice contracts were handed back between 2022-23 and the end of April this year has been mentioned a number of times. That is a testament to the pressures that GPs and their teams have to deal with daily, but it is right to recognise that officials in my Department have worked hard to ensure that, where contracts have been handed back, no practice has closed and patients have continued to access GP services in their area. That achievement is a testament to the work of my departmental officials.

Mrs Erskine mentioned the closure of Roslea. I checked that, and I think that it happened in 2017, somewhat before my tenure, but I will get back to the Member when I have checked who held the Ministry around that time.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for giving way. Mullaghbawn surgery is an example of where the Department and the trust have stepped in, which is welcome, but he will know from our recent correspondence about some of the challenges that are faced there because we do not have a retained workforce but are operating the service with locums. Does the Minister agree that tackling that workforce issue and ensuring that we can retain GPs who consistently provide the continuity of care that is needed for patients is more important?

Mr Swann: Absolutely. I will come back to the Health Committee Chair's point later in my contribution.

It was interesting that Mr Carroll referred to the healthcare model in Cuba. I looked around the Chamber to see how many Members were, like me, here in 2012 and remember that Health Committee members — Jim Wells and Sue Ramsey, I think it was — visited Cuba then to see how that healthcare model worked and whether they could bring back recommendations. I am not sure how far that has progressed since then.

A Member: He is still there.

Mr Swann: That may be uncalled for.

On a serious point, we cannot continue with a situation where, in some instances, GPs face such sustained pressure that they feel that the

only course of action left to them is to hand back their contract. I am firmly of the view that it is not enough for primary care or general practice simply to survive. That is why I said that it was important to stabilise it before we move on to what is my ambition as Health Minister, which is for it to thrive. I want to build the resilience and capacity of the service so that it is sustainable for the long term and is better supported to deliver improved outcomes for patients.

As Mr Chambers mentioned, some of the points in today's motion have been superseded by discussions and engagements that have long been under way. For instance, only last week, I was pleased to announce that agreement had been reached on the 2024-25 general medical services contract. In the past, that was never the subject of debate or a ministerial statement, but I will take forward the concerns that have been raised, and maybe future Health Ministers will make that the subject of a statement. I appreciate the constructive and positive approach to those negotiations that was taken by the leadership of the Northern Ireland General Practitioners Committee to get us to that position. Whilst the budget provided to me by the Executive does not allow me to make a substantial increase in the overall value of the contract, I am pleased that the agreement makes significant progress against one of the key aims identified by GPs, which is the inclusion of provision for dedicated funding for indemnity costs.

Importantly, the new contract arrangements will provide GPs with greater certainty about their income throughout this year, as well as reducing administrative burdens and associated costs to practices.

5.00 pm

The 2024-25 contract replaces the quality and outcomes framework (QOF) with a clinical care domain, which itself is part of a wider Northern Ireland contract assurance framework, and the funding that was previously associated with QOF, as well as a number of specified enhanced services, will now be incorporated, for the first time, into the core GMS contract. It is important to stress that, in bringing QOF and enhanced services into the core contract and under the new contract assurance framework, GPs will still be required to deliver these services to their patients as is clinically appropriate.

I know that GPs have previously raised concerns about indemnity. I am pleased,

therefore, that this year's contract, for the first time, provides dedicated funding of £5 million to practices to support the costs of indemnity. That is an interim measure, as has been identified, pending the identification of a long-term model for future provision. That was a promise that I made to general practitioners before I left office the last time, and it is a promise that I have kept. My Department is committed to identifying solutions to address this issue, and work is continuing on options appraisals through the business case process, which will result in the identification of a proposed way forward for GP indemnity here. However, I am under no illusion that the new 2024-25 contract will resolve all the challenges faced by general practice: given the limits on the funding available to me, to put it quite simply, it will not do that and I do not believe that it can.

The motion refers to the Northern Ireland Audit Office's recently published report on access to general practice, and I have welcomed the publication of that report because it holds up a mirror to the current state of general practice. Its findings reflect my and my Department's assessment of the challenges facing our service. However, I want to be clear on this: the issues impacting on general practice are complex and require a sustained, long-term response. There is simply no short-term fix, and it will take time as well as resources, but we are committed and determined to deliver for primary care, for its workforce and for patients.

Central to that is exploring how we can make primary care and general practice more resilient; improve demand management and access to GP-led services; and strengthen the GP workforce. On demand management and access to GP services, we have already started to do that. A set of principles has been developed that will support more coordinated and streamlined management of the interface between primary and secondary care, clarifying the appropriate responsibility for patient management right across those two sectors.

I am asked regularly, including by Members of this place, when general practice will be back to normal or back to how it used to be. As Minister, I need to be honest and say that we have a growing and ageing population that is living with more complex chronic conditions, and, over time, that is leading to increased demands on our GP services. In a standard week, as has been mentioned, our general medical services clinical teams carry out over 200,000 consultations, of which half are currently done face to face. I fully understand that there will be times when people are frustrated that they cannot get through to their

GP practice without numerous redials, and, again, that is why my Department has been actively looking at practical ways in which we can best respond to and deal with increasing demand.

Our GP access working group is working to continuously improve the management of patient demand and to optimise workflow within practices.

Mr Brooks: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: That group is also exploring how technologies can further develop improvements in accessing services for practices and patients alike.

I will give way to the Member.

Mr Brooks: Does the Minister agree that a way has to be found to prioritise those patients who are trying to reach their GP? I recently had contact from a constituent who found a lump. She complained to me that when she finally got through, she was told that she should go and talk to her local councillors and politicians about the frustration she faced rather than being given a face-to-face appointment. Surely that is unacceptable and surely a way has to be found to prioritise people who have very serious needs.

Mr Swann: I will not deal with a case about a specific patient on the Floor, but if the Member wants to write to me with specific details, we can follow up on that.

It is important to recognise that primary care is changing and that it offers a range of services that previously have been outside its scope and have been provided in secondary care. As an example of that, in April, I announced that regional vasectomy services in Northern Ireland will be fully transferred from secondary care to primary care to be provided by GPs, with the required funding moving from trust budgets into primary care. Innovative initiatives to extend the range of services that are provided in primary care are also happening at a local level. Earlier this month, I visited Moy health centre to see a new GP-led service in the Armagh and Dungannon GP Federation to improve lung health. That early respiratory diagnostic hub will provide advanced lung-function testing, meaning quicker diagnosis, which will reduce respiratory admissions and help deliver better management of respiratory diseases. Those are just a couple of examples of how primary care is evolving, providing a broader range of

services closer to people's home and improving the patient experience, as Ms Dillon referenced.

In order to help primary care to deliver and grow, it is critical that we train, develop, support and retain the GP workforce. In my previous term as Minister, I increased the number of GP training places to 121 by direction. As referenced, that was an increase of 86% since 2015-16. The number of places will be retained at that level even with the challenging budget position that I have. My Department has worked with GP representatives and other stakeholders in the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency (NIMDTA) and our universities to increase the exposure of undergraduates to general practice as part of the curriculum to not only, hopefully, encourage more GP trainees but ensure that there are sufficient GP training practices to meet the demand for and support of GPs in training.

The GP fellowship scheme is also supporting recently qualified GPs to transition from the training environment to independent practice, with opportunities for personal and professional development. My Department very much values the fellowship scheme and the chance that it provides for recently qualified GPs to have access to an attractive portfolio of opportunities. Looking to the future, my Department is considering how the scheme might be further developed, subject to available funding, to extend the range and scope of fellowship placement opportunities and to provide for educational bursaries to be available for all fellows.

Other steps that my Department is taking to support the GP workforce include the introduction of the attract, recruit, retain scheme in order to support the recruitment of GPs in areas where it is hard to recruit. That scheme is already in place. Since its establishment in January 2023, 46 GP practices have applied and received approval in principle for funding under that scheme, and some 25 practices that have applied have received final approval and payment for a recruited GP.

We have continued to boost capacity in the wider primary care workforce by investing £25 million per year in the primary care MDT programme, £90 million annually in the general practice pharmacy programme and £3.1 million to recruit advanced nurse practitioners. Members have discussed, and I know, how valuable MDTs are in areas where they have been established and the difference that MDT roles have made. That model remains key to stabilising vital primary care services in our communities, providing a continuum of high-

quality services right through from prevention to treatment, management and care of patients with more complex needs.

I am committed to the further implementation of the MDT model across Northern Ireland. My Department has long since developed the plan for the implementation of MDTs. Unfortunately, as with other initiatives, the pace and roll-out of MDTs has been seriously and repeatedly constrained by the ability of the necessary recurrent funding to support it. I will point out that, in the transformation pot that the Finance Minister identified, funding for MDTs will be one of the bids that I will make from that, so I look forward to support from across the House in whatever way possible for that bid.

The bottom line is that I cannot deliver what I do not have the money to fund. The 2024-25 Budget, which the Executive recently approved, was deeply disappointing. As a direct consequence, Health will face significant budgetary pressures this year. I have no doubt that, despite the best efforts of my Department and the wider health and social care system, we will deal with the fallout and consequences of that financial shortfall not only in primary care but across health and social care. Sadly and, unfortunately, the fallout from that will impact directly on the lives of people across Northern Ireland. Therefore, I continue to press my case to get the funding that we need for health and social care. That is what I believe our population deserves and what our workforce deserves.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Will the Minister bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Swann: I urge all Members to stand alongside me on this, and, more importantly, to stand alongside health and social care in Northern Ireland because, to reduce waiting lists and to deliver transformation, our health service —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Minister, your time is up.

Mr Swann: — needs the quality services that our people deserve, and it needs commitment from across the Assembly Chamber.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call Cara Hunter to wind on the amendment. You have up to five minutes.

Ms Hunter: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will start by thanking our GPs for their hard work and commitment to the health of our

communities. I know quite a few GPs in my constituency, from Portrush to Limavady and beyond, and I note how much more accessible mental health support, in particular, has been thanks to the advancement of multidisciplinary teams.

I welcome today as an opportunity to talk through some of the most difficult challenges facing general practice and how we must see changes made urgently. The healthcare system in Northern Ireland is overstretched, underfunded and utterly overwhelmed. Primary care, being the bedrock of our health service, provides 95% of the care that people need throughout their lifetime. In March 2024, the NI Audit Office, in a report into GP access, revealed that GPs received just 5.4% of the total health and social care spend in 2022-23. That lack of investment reveals itself most dramatically in the closure of surgeries, emigrating doctors and low morale. So many GPs have been left to make the difficult decision to exit a professional career that has, historically, been both attractive and somewhat rewarding in many ways. GPs have continued to take on fewer hours, and, therefore, fewer patients have been seen. Liz Kimmins touched on the really important issue of there being more attractive options in the South. We are losing talent who choose to practise elsewhere.

Alan Robinson touched on the fact that, last year, 13 GP practices decided to hand back contracts, causing the loss of around 70 doctors, which, undoubtedly, negatively impacted on the thousands of patients who were on their books. That was an inevitable consequence of such decisions, and it will only worsen. The shameful situation is that one quarter of our population is on a health waiting list. With one third of GP practices having sought crisis support in the past four years, it is little wonder that faith in our crumbling health system has been shattered. To underline what we already know, a recent survey found that 72% of people were dissatisfied with their local GP waiting times. Perhaps most worryingly, 32% of patients in need of an emergency appointment reported having to ring more than 30 times, on average, to get through to a receptionist. Having spoken to male constituents in particular, I note that, when they ring GPs, they often get a female receptionist and feel really uncomfortable about talking through more sensitive or private health matters and do not convey how serious something actually is because of embarrassment or hesitation.

Is it any wonder that 85% of people have said that it is more difficult to get access to a GP

post-pandemic than it was before. The Assembly must resolve that issue, reverse the crisis in the health system, protect the health and well-being of our population and ensure that our wider health services are not further overwhelmed by patients who may avoid them if they do not receive a timely GP appointment. Many constituents who are overwhelmed and frustrated, having tried and tried and still not had contact, give up and do not ring back. Today is an opportunity to have the conversation about how we can promote the working conditions that enable our GPs to serve the public in a manner that preserves the dignity of their patients and the profession.

I will move quickly to Members' comments. Deborah Erskine touched on the importance of MDTs in rural areas such as Fermanagh, and I share her concerns and thoughts as I, too, represent a rural constituency. Colin McGrath said that this is a time to unlock opportunities for our health service by investing in primary care. Nuala McAllister said that she is inundated with messages from her constituents about their inability to access a GP. I am sure that none of us is a stranger to that. Alan Chambers acknowledged the work of the Minister so far, and Gerry Carroll included international examples of what we can do in looking to resolve the matter here.

We have seen our GPs shoulder the burden in having to deal with escalating demand alongside a declining workforce, while facing real-terms funding cuts that we have never seen before. Huge challenges lie ahead, but, in having these types of conversations, we are taking all the right steps to ensure that we see changes.

A huge "Thank you" as well to the wider community pharmacy, which also faces significant challenges but has really stepped up to the plate and provided support for communities. The more we invest in primary care and community pharmacies, the smaller the number of people showing up at A&E waiting rooms in utter distress and pain. Now is the time to invest in GPs and community pharmacies.

I thank the Minister for being here to hear our concerns.

5.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call Diane Dodds to conclude and make a winding-up speech. The Member has up to 10 minutes.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and thank you to colleagues for what has been a thoughtful debate. More importantly, however, thank you to our GPs, allied health professionals, health and social care workers and all who do a sterling job in that front-line service of primary care.

Every person in Northern Ireland is registered with a GP, and we all expect an enormous amount from those GPs. The debate has never been about bashing anyone, the Minister or GPs; rather, it has been an opportunity to discuss the problems in a rational, thoughtful way, and I thank colleagues for that today.

There has been much talk in Northern Ireland recently about the Covid-19 inquiry — the Minister has borne the brunt of that, as have I — but the best thing that we can do coming out of that is to give our GPs, constituents and community a health service that is fit for purpose. Minister, you have the support of the Health Committee in doing that. It is important to remember that when we have these debates.

The challenges in primary care and general practice are enormous. The service that the public receive and the environment in which GPs and some public servants work have fundamentally changed over the past 10 or 20 years. Minister, I absolutely accept your assertion that we are not going back. We need to plan for the future and have a proactive vision of what a really good primary healthcare system can look like. As things stand, however, we know that patients are not being assessed in a timely manner. The workload for GPs is continually expanding, and there really are not sufficient staff to run the service at its optimum.

When thinking about the debate, I thought about the general point that I wanted to make. We have talked a lot about transforming our health service. I think that it was Colin McGrath who quoted Bengoa. There is no doubt that there are big, fundamental issues that we need to work at in transforming services for the community, whether for cancer patients, stroke patients or whomever. However, if we do not transform primary care, we will not achieve a knock-on effect in secondary care in elective and other procedures. On that basis, it is good for the House to talk about the challenges that face primary care and those involved in providing it.

Sometimes, we think of this being an almost monumental challenge that we cannot overcome, but there are simple things that we can do that will help us to get to that transformation position. Many Members from

across the Chamber mentioned funding. I am sure that some might take exception to this, but two million of us are registered with GPs, yet they receive 5.4% of the healthcare budget. We will have to rebalance that and look at it for the future. That is important in transforming the service.

While the motion focuses on GPs and GP practices, primary care is about so much more. It is about community pharmacies and mental health support services. It is about the community and voluntary sector, which does sterling work. Many of those organisations work quietly, bit by bit, with the most vulnerable people in our society. That is also very important to remember.

I turn to some of the contributions to the debate, because an important theme runs through them. When proposing the motion, my colleague Mr Robinson described and emphasised the importance of primary care, adequate funding and multidisciplinary teams and of having a workforce strategy so that we can have a plan and measure against targets along the way to see how we are doing. He talked about the retention of GPs in the system and training for GPs.

We support Colin McGrath's amendment, despite the misnaming of Northern Ireland in the midst of it. It is important to remember that we need to embrace change for there to be transformation. If we do not embrace change, services will collapse — we are seeing that — and we will then be transforming services on an ad hoc basis that suits nobody and will not give us a proper vision of primary care. Mr McGrath is fortunate that his constituency saw the roll-out of a fully staffed multidisciplinary team. That is important, because, in Northern Ireland, fewer than 8% of those teams are fully staffed and equipped. We need to look at how we can manage to do that even though the budget is challenging.

Liz Kimmins mentioned the experience of patients and the need to respond to them before conditions become so bad as to be intolerable for them to bear and to cause the time spent in hospital to become much longer. She talked about a permanent solution for the GP indemnity issue and the importance of the community and voluntary sector. Nuala McAllister talked about the impact of handing contracts back and the large number of services involved across primary care.

Mr Chambers was a little perturbed that the motion was too late. I think that the motion is very timely, because we are here talking about

the importance of primary care, GPs and supporting those services. I wish the Minister or his successor well in achieving suitable and practical solutions for GPs. Mr Chambers also talked about multidisciplinary teams. I have no wish to bring politics into this, but I remind Mr Chambers that the initial funding for multidisciplinary teams came from the additional billion pounds that was found in the DUP confidence-and-supply money. It is really important to remember that. I want us to continue to fund those teams, and I will support the Minister in his bid to do so, because they are fundamental to resolving the issue.

Linda Dillon talked about the importance of primary and social care and of taking a holistic approach to well-being in our community. That is important. Well-being is underrated as a value, and it is really important for us to remember that.

My colleague Deborah Erskine made really important points about the impact of the crisis in GP surgeries in rural communities and access to those services. I accept that trusts have done an enormous amount of work to ensure that those GP surgeries continue, even though contracts have been handed back. That is massively important.

There is also the issue of having accountability for GPs, so that we can understand that the services offered are the same and do not encounter a theme that has been commonly expressed in the Chamber today: the inequality of service across Northern Ireland, which is intolerable.

The Deputy Chair of the Committee, Danny Donnelly, talked about the workforce strategy, the plan to retain GPs in general practice and the need to improve core funding. Other colleagues talked about it being important to remember that many in our community have absolutely positive experiences of visiting their GP —

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

Mrs Dodds: — and it is important to remember that.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. This is a hugely important motion, and I hope that those involved in delivering the service understand that we support them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you for concluding the debate.

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

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly values the enormous contribution of those working in primary care across Northern Ireland; notes that this includes GPs, nurses, health visitors, physiotherapists, social workers and mental health practitioners; recognises that primary care is generally the first point of contact within the health service for those who become unwell; further notes the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office report on access to general practice, which found that almost one in three local practices has sought crisis support in the past four years; regrets the absence of a specific workforce strategy for general practice; believes the failure to train, recruit, retain and reward staff has limited progress toward the roll-out of multidisciplinary teams in local primary care settings; calls on the Minister of Health to publish a timescale for the full implementation of multidisciplinary teams across the North; and further calls on the Minister of Health to provide an indemnity scheme for GPs in Northern Ireland in line with arrangements in other parts of the United Kingdom; and calls on the Minister to increase the number of GP training places and invest in an enhanced fellowship programme for newly qualified GPs as part of an ambitious, costed and time-bound plan to grow the primary care workforce.

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

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

Insurance Costs: Reductions for Workers, Families and Businesses

Mr Boylan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the unprecedented increases in insurance premiums for home, business and car insurance, which are crippling workers, families and small businesses, many of whom are already struggling with the cost-of-living crisis; acknowledges that many motorists have seen their quotes increase significantly even if they have not had an accident, speeding fine or a change in circumstances; further acknowledges that the increase in insurance

premiums has generated huge profits for the insurance industry and a windfall in insurance premium tax collected by the British Government; recognises that the Financial Conduct Authority, the Prudential Regulation Authority and the Competition and Markets Authority have a duty to monitor and regulate the insurance industry, investigate any allegations of unfair practices and to ensure consumers receive a fair price; calls on these bodies to fulfil their statutory duties to hold the insurance industry to account and investigate the recent increases in insurance premiums; and further calls on the British Government to reduce the rate of insurance premium tax, which puts an additional financial burden on workers, families and small businesses.

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

Mr Boylan: Whilst the issue lies outside the Chamber, it is vital that we bring the subject to the Chamber and have this conversation. I have heard people talk about the fact that we have not brought any legislation to the Chamber for a period of time. The motion is important because it affects constituents across the North of the island.

Rising insurance premiums place huge financial strain on workers, families and young drivers.

They are occurring at a time when people are struggling day-to-day during what is an unprecedented cost-of-living crisis. Insurance price hikes are ripping off families and hard-pressed workers. The average insurance cost for drivers is £1,000. Young people are quoted even more expensive costs. It is devastating for young people who have passed their driving test after studying and practising hard to be quoted ridiculous prices for insurance. Average car insurance prices are 57% more expensive than they were last year, and they have doubled for some drivers. Those quotes have been a nightmare for so many people, especially for those who depend on their car for work, to support their family and to get about in general. They have been left with excess costs through no fault of their own, but they have had to bear them because they depend on their car in their daily life.

5.30 pm

My office has been contacted by many constituents who are feeling the effects of those unfair rises. They are affecting everyone when times are already tough. Although inflation has impacted on costs, as it has on most things, the hike in premiums goes beyond the rate of inflation. People also feel that they are experiencing discrimination, as insurance companies are basing their quotes on factors that are beyond the customer's control. Some drivers have been charged significantly more than others based on their home address rather than on their driver history. That has been felt particularly by those who live in areas of high deprivation such as west Belfast and the border regions. There is frustration that many customers have seen their premiums rise even if they have not been involved in an accident or received any penalty points. They feel that they are being punished despite their exemplary record on the road.

Rising premiums are impacting on everyone who depends on a car, from teachers to nurses and from taxi men to traders. This is happening during a cost-of-living crisis, when people are already paying increased costs for nearly everything else, including fuel. It is clear that insurance companies need to do better by the people who have no choice but to pay outrageous insurance hikes. The Executive have no powers over insurance, as it sits within the remit of the British Government. The responsibility for regulating the market lies with the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), the Prudential Regulation Authority (PRA) and the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA).

Mr Stewart: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned the FCA. One of its roles is to ensure that people get value for money. Members will have heard from their constituents about the vast range of quotes given. It just shows what is going on out there. The amount that insurance companies are charging is a scandal. One constituent of mine received quotes ranging from £5,000 to £13,000. How does that demonstrate value for money and value for the customer?

Mr Boylan: I absolutely agree with the Member. In the debate, we have to try to get the message out however we can. As another member of the Committee for Infrastructure, he will know that we wrote to some of those institutions, and, indeed, that was my next point.

It is worth noting that the Committee for Infrastructure has written to a number of those authorities on the issue of price hikes. The regulatory bodies should fully examine and

scrutinise the insurance industry over the ridiculous cost increases.

Sinn Féin supports an investigation into insurance price hikes in order to hold the industry to account. People have had enough of being ripped off. Sinn Féin will continue to stand up for hard-pressed workers and families. I ask those who will speak in the debate, and the Assembly as a whole, to support the motion.

Ms Forsythe: I will first say that my party supports the motion. We are all aware that insurance premiums have been increasing on our cars, homes and even pets. That is putting additional pressure on hard-pressed working families. The Republic of Ireland is having similar problems, with an enormous 10% increase in private health insurance compared with the previous year. That leaves the price of health insurance in the Republic now with basic insurance costing around £1,500, but it certainly can range well in excess of £5,000 a year, and we are truly fortunate to have healthcare that is free at the point of delivery in Northern Ireland via the NHS.

Whilst in the past, insurance premium increases seemed to follow inflation, they have recently shot up by some 12% compared with this time last year, significantly higher than the rate of inflation. We know that car insurance, in particular, is a serious issue in Northern Ireland, especially for young drivers. I am extremely grateful that our DUP colleague, Carla Lockhart, the MP for Upper Bann, has championed that in recent times. She secured a debate on the issue in the House of Commons only two months ago, raising it directly with the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Transport, Anthony Browne MP. She was supported by Gregory Campbell and Jim Shannon in that debate, both of whom reinforced the point that that level of cost to motorists is unacceptable. This party will never shy away from taking the fight to where the decisions are actually made.

Having examined car insurance in more detail, we know that, on average, 17- to 20-year-olds have had their insurance premiums rise by more than £1,000 compared with last year. Those substantial rises must be examined by the FCA because they are simply pricing many young drivers out of the market. Put simply, the cost of insuring a car for a year is now significantly higher than actually buying the car in the first place. It is most certainly the case that most young people drive responsibly and safely, but it is also the case that the majority of young drivers suffer because of the actions of

the minority. That is part of the reason for the spiralling cost of insurance.

We can learn some lessons from other countries about how we progress on this issue. In Australia, learner drivers are statistically 20% less likely to be killed or seriously. The differences are that young people can apply for a provisional driving licence at age 16 and a half, but they then have to drive for 120 hours before they take their test. The average amount of time that young people in the UK drive before they take their test is 40 hours. Those fairly small changes have meant that, in Australia, the number of those likely to be killed or injured has dropped by 20%.

Legitimate questions need to be asked about why the average cost of house insurance in Northern Ireland is £347, while in London, where house prices are considerably higher, it is £309. There seems to be no reason nor rationale for that. Surely that also needs to be examined by the regulator. To widen that point, if houses are more expensive in London and the repair costs are clearly higher, the legitimate question needs to be asked: why are insurance costs higher in Northern Ireland, where the repair costs are significantly lower?

When it comes to our four-legged friends, pet owners in Northern Ireland pay more than owners in Scotland and Wales, but pet insurance is more expensive in England. The cost of pet insurance is determined by breed, and we can easily assume that breeds are fairly spread across the entirety of the UK.

In summary, we are content to support the motion and ask that the appropriate regulators investigate the unexplainably high levels of insurance that Northern Ireland people have to pay.

Mr Tennyson: As other Members have said, whilst this is primarily a reserved matter, I welcome the opportunity to debate this important topic, which has been a leading contributor to the rising cost of living. All of us in the Chamber will have been contacted by constituents about rising costs, with some facing car insurance renewals that are 50% higher than they were just a year ago. The Association of British Insurers (ABI) estimates that car insurance increased by 34% between the end of 2022 and the end of 2023. In attempting to justify that increase, the ABI points to a 31% increase in vehicle repair costs and a 35% increase in the cost of providing temporary vehicles.

If you scratch below the surface of those figures, however, you will find that the total of UK insurance payouts increased by just 18%. That data, combined with the fact that insurance premiums in the UK are significantly higher than in many of our European neighbours, begs the question as to whether customers being taken for a ride — the pun is intended on that one, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.

Nevertheless, those sharp increases are not being felt equally. Sales data examined by 'Which' suggests that as of last September, drivers who pay for insurance monthly are forking out, on average, £300 more than those who pay in a lump sum. Those who spread payments are disproportionately younger and less-wealthy people, leading the head of insurance at the Financial Conduct Authority to describe insurers' interest rates as "a tax on being poor." In order to maximise transparency, insurers' interest rates should be compared in a published league table, with the regulator taking strong action against those who do not provide fair value in line with their statutory obligations.

Younger drivers fare worse in price increases. On average, 18-year-olds now pay £3,145 for their car insurance, which is a staggering £1,300, or 70%, more in the past 12 months. I am deeply conscious that those costs have a hugely prohibitive and regressive impact on employment and social opportunities, particularly in rural areas such as parts of my constituency where public transport links are lacking in choice and frequency and late-night services are non-existent. To be clear, I am an advocate of modal shift, but, if we are to change behaviours, we should do so through progressive and fair taxation and reinvestment in public transport and active travel alternatives, not by relying on rip-off insurance premiums.

The insurance industry states that young drivers are more likely to be involved in crashes. In fairness, that view is supported by data. In 2021, 8,753 under-25 drivers were involved in an accident in Northern Ireland, which means that they were involved in 18% of all car accidents that year. It remains the fact, however, that, as Diane Forsythe said, the majority of young people drive responsibly and, as ever, are suffering as a consequence of the actions of a minority in our community. This is where the Executive have a role: in education, in supporting better and safer driving and in improving road safety. A graduated driving licence scheme is one option that, I hope, the Minister for Infrastructure will consider in due course. We also know that our planning system and flood alleviation measures play an

important role in the home insurance premiums that our constituents pay.

I will turn to insurance premium tax. In recent years, under the Conservative Government, there has been a pattern of pursuing tax cuts for the wealthiest in society whilst hiking taxes that are paid by working families. Since the Conservatives formed the Government in 2010, insurance premium tax has increased from 5% to 12%. That adds £67 to the average policy and, again, is regressive in that the cost is highest to younger drivers and those who already fork out the most on car insurance and other insurance. An argument can be made that a targeted reduction for those facing the highest costs would be a progressive intervention.

I support the motion. The Financial Conduct Authority should do more and should consider a full market inquiry into the insurance industry. I also agree that the UK Government need to take a more proactive approach to upholding the FCA's responsibility for proper scrutiny.

Mr Stewart: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and thank Sinn Féin for tabling it. We will support it. I urge caution to anyone who has tuned in: clearly, we will not be able to resolve the matter today, but it is important that we send a unanimous collective message from the Chamber that we support further regulation of the insurance industry to see these ridiculous premiums come down.

Insurance premiums used to be expensive, but they are now just extortionate. We all see that in our daily life, in our car insurance, our home insurance, our life insurance and our pet insurance. Everything that we pay continues to go up and up every year, and the most vulnerable in our society pay the price. That is clearly the case across Europe, where the average increase in insurance premiums at the moment is between 10% and 12%, but, in the United Kingdom, it is 34%.

The previous Member to speak mentioned the costs that young drivers pay, which surged from an average of £1,423 a year to £2,877 in the past year. We all have constituents in that situation. One contacted me last week: an 18-year-old who had just passed his driving test. He drives a £2,000 VW Golf and was quoted £7,000 a year for insurance. That is half his salary. It is pricing him totally out of the market. He finally got a policy for about £4,500, and he thought that he had done well. It is farcical. That is the point that I made to Mr Boylan in my intervention: the FCA says that it is ensuring that people receive fair value, but how is there

such a gap in insurance quotes? None of them is fair. It just seems absolutely ridiculous. We obviously need to see action to extend the role of the Financial Conduct Authority and other regulators in dealing with that.

We are trying to encourage more people to use electric vehicles, but the cost of insurance premiums that people pay for electric vehicles has doubled. It costs up to £5,000 a year to drive an EV.

5.45 pm

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. It might be the case, particularly in more rural constituencies such as mine, that the reason for the high level of breakdowns and recovery of electric vehicles is that there is no infrastructure for charging them. That is the case in West Tyrone in particular. Maybe that is a contributing factor to the higher insurance rates.

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

Mr Stewart: Thank you for the extra minute. It more than likely is a factor, and I would like to see a lot more electric vehicle charging points across the country.

Those are prime examples of issues that are outside the remit of the individual who is taking out the insurance but that the insurance companies add to it. People are being ripped off. We have heard that the increased costs for insurance companies are around 18% per year, but the average increase in premiums is 34% a year and growing. We are being penalised because the insurance companies want to grow their margins, and that seems to be deeply unfair. I do not want anyone to play a small violin for me, but I have a 15-year no-claims bonus, and my insurance premium has risen by another £300 a year. It seems ridiculous, and we are all in that boat, because everybody in the Chamber has insurance, as has their family, and everyone knows the impact that the cost has.

It impacts our businesses as well, and if we speak to small business owners, we find that the cost of public liability insurance has gone through the roof, as have contents insurance and stock and building insurance. That is virtually impossible for them, and they are running to stand still. That point should also be incorporated into the motion.

I will give an anecdote. A local sports club contacted me to say that an overseas professional player was coming over, and they wanted to drive for the six-month duration of the season but were quoted between £9,000 and £27,000 for their insurance premium. That beggars belief, and they ended up having to take the £9,000 policy because there was no alternative and they needed the transport. We need to see action.

We all know how nice it is to finally pass your test, given all the hurdles that you have to jump over and the amount of money that you have to spend. Many of our young people are now being priced out of the market and are unable to afford the insurance. Affordable insurance is vital for our economy, because many roles require people to commute or to drive, and those people cannot do either of those because they cannot get the insurance that they need.

I do not want to labour the point for much longer. I agree with everything that has been said, but we should all urge the Financial Conduct Authority to carry out a full investigation of the market. I know that it has resisted such calls to date, particularly following the debate at Westminster, which was referred to. It has a duty and responsibility to investigate, as do all the regulators, and we need to see that investigation carried out as quickly as possible in order to ensure fairness and value for all our constituents.

Mr McCrossan: I thank my colleague for tabling this important motion. I raised the issue on the Floor in the first week that the Assembly and the institutions returned. It is an important issue that we have been hearing about for some time, but the situation has worsened. When I raised it publicly at the earliest possible opportunity, there was a bit of a reaction, but, ultimately, as the months have gone on, I have heard from more people about the extortionate cost of insurance.

I have personal experience from when I was due to renew my car insurance. To avoid being put out of the Chamber, I will not repeat my reaction when I phoned to renew the insurance, as it was shocking. My insurance had gone up by 65%, which is extortionate, unjustified and could not be explained. There had been no claims; I had simply changed the car, and that was the result. That is the reality for a lot of people, but we have to be honest about the discriminatory effect that that has on low-income families, the working poor, the people who go out to make ends meet every day and the carers who look after people but are not remunerated sufficiently for the cost of the

travel to do that important work. Amongst all that, however, is the hidden cost of insurance that means that those people must decide whether they can afford to do the job. The cost and consequences of that for our society and constituents are huge.

I have reached out to many insurance companies about the issue, and I have written countless letters. The SDLP raised it at Westminster as well. However, it is interesting that, when I mentioned it for the first time publicly, the Association of British Insurers almost instantly reached out to me without being prompted, and that showed me that there was nervousness and anxiety about what was going on in Northern Ireland, because, in the absence of the institutions, we did not have the opportunity to shine a spotlight on exactly what was happening. There is a need for the Financial Conduct Authority to investigate what is happening with insurance companies. It is my opinion that they are bogging the hands into the pockets of the people in Northern Ireland more so than those of the people in Scotland, England, Wales or anywhere else. When I asked for an explanation of why that is happening, I was told, as Mr Tennyson rightly articulated, that it is because of the cost of parts going up or the cost of replacement cars for people whose vehicles are in getting repaired. It just does not stack up. In my opinion, the Association of British Insurers is nervous around the issue. That is enough for me to keep pushing at the bruise. We need to get to the bottom of why Northern Ireland is being treated differently from anywhere else.

The issues relating to young people have, rightly, been pointed out. The majority of young people are being penalised and punished. They are out getting a part-time job and trying to stay in education and keep a car on the road. When you live in such a constituency as mine — West Tyrone — you do not have the luxury of public transport links that are sufficient to meet the demands of the local population, so those young people rely heavily on their vehicle. That is putting pressure on parents to support the young people in not only their education but in their means of travel to get to that place of education and to return home.

That is before we even touch on the wider issues with insurance for businesses. I declare an interest as a director of a company. We have seen a huge rise in the level of insurance premiums for businesses. It is an extortionate rise — thousands of pounds more than the previous year, without any justification. An insurance company can come along and say, "We're not insuring you because there was a

flood 30 miles down the road". Therefore, you are not covered for that risk, but the insurance company will increase your premium by maybe £5,000, £6,000 or £7,000. It is absolutely ridiculous; as has been described by other Members, it is extortion. We need to call it out for what it is, because it is unacceptable, and it is causing a huge level of pain to our constituents, who are already struggling with the cost of food prices and the cost of living generally, with rising mortgage, rent and electricity costs. It is huge. The insurance companies saw an opportunity in the cost-of-living crisis: they jumped on the bandwagon, slapped the price up and did not care about the consequences for our people.

I will give Members a quick insight: AIG paid out its highest dividend since 2007; Allianz's profit jumped 5.7% to €14.2 billion; Aviva's profit rose 8% to £715 million; AXA is earning 23% per share; and NFU Mutual had a profit of £220 million. They are making huge money off the backs of ordinary people. Today, in the House, whilst we cannot resolve the situation, we can call for action. I am delighted that we are united on that journey.

Mr Brett: I thank Mr Boylan and colleagues for bringing the motion this evening. It is, as others have said, a very important subject. As it was for Mr McCrossan, so it was for me one of the first issues that I raised in a Member's statement, and I instantaneously received an email from the Association of British Insurers asking whether I had any concerns about its activities. I am delighted that all colleagues on the Economy Committee came together to write to the ABI to request that it come to the Economy Committee. Its representatives will be coming tomorrow to set out their stall and try to defend the unacceptable price hikes that have already been inflicted upon the people of Northern Ireland. Kindly, they have sent us 55 pages of a rebuke on why certain things are required, but I am sure that members of all shades will take the opportunity, tomorrow, to highlight to them the clear disparity that exists.

I turn now to my constituency — and yours, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. There is clearly an attempt by the insurers to focus their major price hikes on communities that can least afford it. Working-class communities the length and breadth of North Belfast are being given the largest price rises, be that in home insurance, pet insurance or car insurance. I receive correspondence on a monthly, weekly and daily basis from concerned parents who have this simple choice: do they pay their car insurance or home insurance, or meet their rent or mortgage payments? Those are the simply

unacceptable situations that people in our community are being placed in. As Mr McCrossan so eloquently articulated, it is not as if the insurance companies need the additional profit that they are making.

I turn now to my role as DUP economy spokesperson. It is clear that businesses across Northern Ireland are being hit by unacceptable rises in insurance renewal prices. On many occasions, those are sent very late in the day, meaning that those businesses have no opportunity to shop around or try to make alternative arrangements. This is at a time when the cost-of-living crisis is already hitting the margins needed to pay their staff. With rates being increased and difficulties being caused by increased costs in the supply chain, this is just another example of how businesses across Northern Ireland are being squeezed.

Young drivers who have finally realised their life ambition of passing their driving test are simply unable to receive the insurance that they need. My nephew recently passed his driving test, and his insurance cost three times more than his first Fiat 500, which was 10 years old. It is an unacceptable situation that is repeated in families and households across Northern Ireland.

Tomorrow and in the House, it is important that we take every chance that we can to send a clear message to these companies. The activities that they engage in can only be described as profiting on the back of hard-pressed householders across Northern Ireland. Today, the clear and very strong message being sent from all corners of the House is that we will not accept their lame excuses; we will not allow our communities to be exploited; and we will stand together to call on the FCA, which claims to be the regulator, to act. However, if that organisation is doing nothing to regulate the industry, what is the point of it in the first place? Mr Allen, others and I have written on numerous occasions to the industry's regulatory body asking it to conduct an investigation, and it has refused to do so. If others will not take action and put a spotlight on this important issue, I know that Members on all sides of the House will continue to raise it.

We are very happy to support the motion. Thank you, Mr Boylan and others for tabling it

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Phillip. I call Phillip Brett — not Phillip Brett, sorry. *[Laughter.]* There are too many Phillips.

Mr Brett: I can speak again — *[Inaudible.]*

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: No, you are all right. You were marvellous, but we have heard enough. *[Laughter.]* Anyway, I call Philip McGuigan to make a winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr McGuigan: Philip with one L agus *[Translation: and]* Phillip with two Ls is probably the easiest way to distinguish.

I was not expecting to speak. I am just counting, and six Members have spoken so far. John Hume used to talk about a "single transferable speech", but, on this occasion, Members added in the names of family members or constituents. Everybody talked about exactly the same thing, and that highlights just how important an issue this is and how it is affecting all the people whom we represent across the North.

As Members said, it is important to highlight, as the wording of the motion does:

"the unprecedented increases in insurance premiums for home, business and car insurance, which are crippling workers, families and small businesses, many of whom are already struggling with the cost-of-living crisis ... many motorists have seen their insurance quotes increase significantly even if they have not had an accident, a speeding fine or a change in circumstances".

I, like others, can quote numerous examples of people who have come into my constituency office to say that their insurance quotes are more than double the previous cost of their insurance. I can also point to the increasingly ludicrous high quotes given to young drivers on passing their driving tests.

Workers, families, businesses and people for whom having a car is essential in order to work, attend hospital appointments or run their kids to school are already dealing with a cost-of-living crisis and a crisis in the cost of doing business. They cannot help but feel that they are not being treated fairly. Indeed, many feel that they are being ripped off by astronomical insurance premiums. As other Members pointed out, the average insurance policy for drivers in the North is now over £1,000, which would have been unthinkable just a number of years ago. For many younger drivers, it can be £3,000.

The rising cost of insurance is simply unsustainable. Customers cannot be expected to keep paying those costs alongside increased fuel prices and other costs. Insurance companies need to do more to protect their

customers. It is simply not acceptable for them to pass the buck and say that it is out of their control. Insurance is a reserved matter — it is under the control of Westminster — so, unfortunately, the Executive have no authority to intervene in the insurance market. However, as other Members said, we can send a strong message to those who should be taking responsibility. I am talking about the FCA: it needs to take responsibility and investigate. Thus far, the response and action from the FCA have been lacklustre, to say the least.

As we debate the motion today, none of those regulatory bodies has carried out an investigation of the insurance industry to ensure that customers in the North are not being subjected to unfair business practices. That needs to happen. If it does not, those bodies risk undermining public confidence in their ability to hold the industry to account and protect customers.

6.00 pm

The British Government also need to step up. So far, they have done extremely well out of the crisis through the collection of the insurance premium tax, which has doubled from 6% to 12% in the past decade. Last year, it raked in a staggering £8 billion for the British Treasury, an increase of 10% on the previous year. People have done the calculations: it has added an average of £220 to household bills every year. The FCA and the British Government need to take action to support workers and families. We will continue to press the insurance industry on those spiralling prices and stand up for workers and families who are struggling to afford those costs.

I talked about the single transferable speech. My contribution has added to what has already been said, and I will now quickly encapsulate what others said. My colleague Cathal opened the debate and talked about the spiralling costs, as did everybody else, and the impact that they are having on workers and families who are already struggling. He mentioned geographical discrimination and pointed to the West Belfast constituency in particular.

Diane Forsythe talked about young drivers, in particular, being priced out of the market. She said that, in some cases, the insurance premium is more than the cost of the car. A few Members gave examples of that. She also said that we could learn from the example of other countries, such as Australia.

Eóin Tennyson talked about how the industry has been trying thus far to justify its price increases but that, when they are looked at closely, its arguments simply do not stack up. He dissected its arguments. He said that, while this is a reserved matter, we could have a role in better education and the promotion of driver safety.

John Stewart talked about the need for the further regulation of insurance companies. He said that the increases were having an effect on the most vulnerable in particular. I think that everybody came to the conclusion that, in this case, the most vulnerable and lowest-paid working families suffer the most. He said that he did not understand how the FCA can justify the fairness principle, and he gave examples.

Daniel McCrossan talked about his experience, where his insurance went up by 65% despite him having made no claims. Again, he talked about the discriminatory effect on low-income working families. He and Phillip Brett said that the ABI reached out to them after they raised the matter. As Phillip said, the ABI is coming to the Economy Committee tomorrow. John also mentioned that insurance premiums for not just car drivers but businesses continue to rise extortionately. He pointed out that it not the case that premiums need to rise; he clearly explained that the dividends and profits of a number of the companies continue to rise and that insurance companies continue to make huge profits.

Phillip Brett talked about how the insurance companies are coming to the Economy Committee tomorrow after he and others wrote to them. He talked about the unacceptable levels of the price hikes and said that people in his constituency of North Belfast cannot continue to afford paying for car insurance alongside paying for heating, petrol and other cost-of-living pressures. He also referred to businesses being hit. He gave the example of his nephew's car insurance being three times the cost of the car. He talked about the need for the Assembly to have a united voice in sending a clear message. That has certainly been the key point of the debate.

Everybody said the same things and articulated the impact that this is having on the people whom we represent. The people who are supposed to be looking after the community and regulating insurance companies do not seem to be doing a very good job, and they need to be held to account. That was the basis of the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the unprecedented increases in insurance premiums for home, business and car insurance, which are crippling workers, families and small businesses, many of whom are already struggling with the cost-of-living crisis; acknowledges that many motorists have seen their quotes increase significantly even if they have not had an accident, speeding fine or a change in circumstances; further acknowledges that the increase in insurance premiums has generated huge profits for the insurance industry and a windfall in insurance premium tax collected by the British Government; recognises that the Financial Conduct Authority, the Prudential Regulation Authority and the Competition and Markets Authority have a duty to monitor and regulate the insurance industry, investigate any allegations of unfair practices and to ensure consumers receive a fair price; calls on these bodies to fulfil their statutory duties to hold the insurance industry to account and investigate the recent increases in insurance premiums; and further calls on the British Government to reduce the rate of insurance premium tax, which puts an additional financial burden on workers, families and small businesses.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Just give us a few minutes. Take your ease while we change the top Table.

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

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair).]

Adjournment

Special Educational Needs Provision: South Down

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): In conjunction with the Business Committee, the Speaker has given leave to Cathy Mason to raise the matter of special educational needs provision in South Down. I call Cathy Mason, who has up to 15 minutes.

Mrs Mason: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.]* I have brought the Adjournment debate to the Assembly today to give a voice to the young people with special educational needs (SEN) in my constituency, their families and their schools. Several weeks ago, members of the Education Committee were advised that Education officials were working on the basis that up to 1,000 additional spaces would be required for children with special educational needs. For me, it is difficult to understand how, year after year, that situation persists. The Department and the Education Authority (EA) have access to a range of information, statistics and trends that should enable them to prepare accordingly, but it just does not seem to happen. This is not a criticism of the Minister; I accept that he is only in through the door. He has said that special educational needs is a priority, and I welcome that. However, today, we need to hear directly from him what is the plan and what is being done to ensure that children with special educational needs are suitably placed, on time and with the support and resources that they are entitled to.

Going back to my constituency, I am inspired by examples of outstanding SEN provision, and I am mindful of the incredible staff who truly are the backbone of special educational needs provision. I want to give particular mention to the classroom assistants, who, as we know, are not yet getting the pay and conditions that they deserve but who turn up every day to care for and support the education of some of our most vulnerable children. Those professionals must be properly valued and get the fair pay that they are entitled to.

Schools like St Malachy's Primary School in Castlewellan, with its dedicated learning support units where exceptional staff deliver amazing results for children, or St Brigid's Primary School or Our Lady and St Patrick Primary School in Downpatrick, which have shown fantastic leadership with specialist provisions that they have facilitated, and, of course, Knockevin Special School, which was recently given the green light for its much-needed new build, like many others in South Down, go above and beyond for the children and young people whom they are responsible for but are under relentless pressure and need to be properly supported. We know that there are schools ready and willing to step up and open up specialist provisions to provide the much-needed places this autumn, but they require the necessary investment for facilities, appropriately trained staff and the proper resources to be able to deliver specialist provision effectively. I am aware that a number of schools have come forward with the capacity to open specialist provisions, but the Department is not taking them up on that. It has not properly engaged with the schools, and that represents a missed opportunity. When we are dealing with such a crisis and facing a situation in which many children and young people with special educational needs may be without a place in September, we simply cannot afford to miss such opportunities. I urge the Minister to take another look at specialist provision in schools, and I would be more than happy to meet him to discuss the issues more thoroughly.

No conversation about special educational needs can take place without mentioning early intervention. It is at the heart of childcare and early years provision, so it is key that the Minister work directly with the Health Minister to ensure that lines of communication are open and that there is information sharing to allow for future planning.

In recent months, officials from the Department and the Education Authority have been keen to stress that the school placements situation is not a crisis. Tell that to children who do not know where they will go to school in September or whether they will have a suitable place at all. Try telling the parents of a child who has not yet got a placement and for whom every day spent trying to navigate the process is a nightmare that this is not a crisis. The reality for those children and their families is that it is a crisis. The Minister should acknowledge that, and so should the Education Authority. To tackle a crisis on this scale, families need to see a response in which they can have confidence. The Minister should consider redeploying staff

and expertise to help deliver solutions for those children and their families. I also encourage the Minister to give proper consideration to a "SEN first" approach when it comes to school placements.

Let us demonstrate by our actions that children with SEN are, in fact, a priority. We can do that by ensuring that they are placed no later than their fellow pupils. Let us move beyond treating children and young people with SEN as supernumerary when it comes to placements.

I thank the Speaker for the opportunity to secure this important debate, and I thank the Minister for his time this evening and for listening to the concerns that I have raised. I will work with everyone in the Chamber to bring forward solutions to ensure that every child has the right to education. Let us work together to ensure that every child is suitably placed, on time and with the support needed this September.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): All other Members will have approximately six minutes in which to speak.

Ms Forsythe: I thank the Member for securing this evening's Adjournment debate. She and I know all too well that public services across the board in South Down have fallen far behind those in other areas. I welcome every opportunity to make the case for why the constituency that I represent and call "home" deserves better, and special educational needs is one example.

When the Assembly returned in February, the Education Minister, in responding to queries, mine included, was prompt to note that South Down had been identified as an area of particular pressure for special educational needs provision, with additional places in special schools and specialist provision in mainstream classes being required. I welcome his Department's continued commitment to delivering improved services for special educational needs for all of Northern Ireland and his acknowledgement of the notable numbers of additional special school places and provisions that are required in South Down.

Our local special school, Knockevin, is fantastic, and I am absolutely delighted that the Minister visited it and witnessed the amazing community that surrounds it. I am also delighted that he has announced a new school build. That is much needed, as Knockevin's current functionality is under extreme pressure across three separate sites in Dundrum, Castlewellan

and Downpatrick. I hope that we see strong progress, at pace, on the new school.

The South Down constituency spans a large area and is predominantly rural. That places significant pressures on services. Linked to that is a need to ensure that children with special educational needs can access those services effectively. There is a lack of local early intervention services, with many children needing to travel for well over an hour for assessments or diagnoses and their parents being put under extreme pressure to get time off work to attend those appointments. Further significant journeys are regularly needed for ongoing therapeutic care.

I have raised with the Minister how important it is to ensure that the Department of Education and the Department of Health walk hand in hand in delivering solutions on early intervention and in responding to the specific additional challenges in accessing them in rural areas such as South Down.

I urge the Minister to remain committed to that through securing schemes such as Sure Start, which is a great example of bringing a joined-up approach to many small towns and villages across Northern Ireland. I also encourage formal agreement between the Department of Education and the Department of Health for health professionals to conduct assessments in school settings, particularly in preschools, to facilitate early diagnoses and take some pressure off families in accessing long-distance appointments.

6.15 pm

The issue of transport is also significant in South Down. As previously noted, South Down is a large constituency with significant travel for many pupils. Home-to-school transport is a huge challenge, and I ask the Minister to keep the consideration of regional disparity and the increased need in rural areas high on his agenda, as children are sometimes disadvantaged due to the regional average costings.

My final point is hugely important. I emphasise, as Cathy Mason has, the important role of non-teaching staff in the education and care of children with special educational needs. Without them, the children could not access their education or their travel, and there is particular pressure in that area. I ask the Minister to continue his work to find a settlement on the pay and grading review. Every child deserves the best start in life, and

children in South Down with special educational needs face disadvantage. That situation needs to improve. All children with special educational needs deserve to be placed in a timely manner in advance of September 2024.

I, again, thank the Member for securing the debate today.

Mr McMurray: I thank my associate Member for South Down for bringing this item forward for debate. At the outset, we must keep education and welfare outcomes for children at the forefront of our thoughts. I think that we would all, to a person, speak about trying to ensure that every opportunity for education is maximised. Also of note is the dedication of the staff involved and how they best deal with the complex needs of individual children to ensure that they have positive educational experiences. From a personal point of view, I certainly associate myself with the comments that Cathy made about St Malachy's and the other schools too.

In my previous role — I have referenced it before — I worked as an instructor in an outdoor learning centre. Primarily, we dealt with schools that wished to avail themselves of a residential outdoor centre for their pupils. As such, I worked with many a school that had children with special educational needs in their mainstream classes and those which had special educational needs classes on their own, and I also worked with special schools that came to the centre. That was always very rewarding work. Indeed, when I read the Hansard report from when the issue was debated previously — it was tabled by a party colleague — I noticed that some of the schools that were referenced were schools that I have worked with. In fact, coincidentally, I know that it is not in South Down, but I was due to be working with Lisnally Special School before my career took a very abrupt turn, but anyway.

It is hard to know where to start when it comes to SEN provision because it is such a gigantic and wide issue, but perhaps the simplest place to begin is to say that it has been known for a number of years, as was noted by the Department of Education in response to a question, that:

"Future years are the problem, based on the extent of underfunding that is proposed in the draft Budget. It is a concern, which is the case right across our budgets."

The underinvestment in special education and complex needs has been commented on since 2009. Indeed, I have a constituent whose

professional career has involved being in the special school education system, and these issues have been highlighted to me for a long time. We have the best intentions of providing education for children with more-complex needs, but the practical provision and training for that is sometimes lacking. Indeed, the first remark that one teacher of a special school made to me when learning of the capital investment plan that the Minister recently announced was, "Whilst it is good news, it is now just a small matter of getting the staff to work on it". We appreciate that.

Once in the system, it is extremely challenging for parents to navigate that system. As described to me, it is a very prolonged and arduous process. As one parent put it to me, "Nothing has been given. Everything that we have received has had to be fought for", and it got to the point where that parent essentially established their own informal forum to help other parents navigate the system.

There is a direct correlation between early assessment and the gaining of a statement, which leads to positive educational outcomes for the child in question. Again, I quote:

"insufficient access to Educational Psychology Services has a negative impact on the early referral process".

The practical outworkings of that are that a school will receive an educational psychologist for a grand total of 22 hours a year, yet a single assessment might take up to nine hours to complete. It is a finite resource. Once that assessment and need has been established and accounted for, the process of getting the child to school can prove difficult, as Diane Forsythe touched on, when the means of transport is not available.

I touched on capacity in the system. Schools have had their numbers increased, yet they remain on a site that was not designated for such a number. Schools have essentially reached capacity to the point where they can no longer accept new admissions, which, in turn, means that children have to be transported out of their area to receive schooling adequate to their needs.

As with many issues, there needs to be an inter-agency approach and cross-departmental working to achieve positive outcomes. Inclusion and diversity are important for children in the education system, but, to achieve that, the system must be given the resources, training and funding. The difficult part, given the

pressures that we are under, is that we need time to get it right.

I thank the Member for South Down for securing the Adjournment debate. The outcomes for young people with complex educational needs must be kept to the forefront of our efforts. I look forward to working with my colleagues in other parties to help achieve that.

Ms Ennis: I thank my constituency colleague Cathy Mason for bringing this important debate to the Chamber tonight. I thank everybody for their contributions so far. I echo what Cathy said about it being a crisis in SEN. It is not just a crisis in South Down, although, unfortunately, we are the unwelcome headline when it comes to SEN. It is a crisis across the North. It is only when we treat it as a crisis and acknowledge that we are in crisis mode that we can begin to really sort the problem out.

Too many young people and their parents in South Down and across the North are being failed by the current system. The recent reports that South Down was identified as an area under the greatest pressure for special educational needs provision is, unfortunately, not news to me, to any of my constituency colleagues here or to the families who come to our offices at their wits' end, desperately seeking help. It is causing massive stress and worry for families across South Down, because they are not getting the support for their children that they so desperately need. That is a concern for the Minister and for all of us. Young people with special educational needs in South Down and their families must have access to properly funded, first-class support services. As I said, in South Down, that is not the case.

As we approach September, the Department must offer children with special educational needs a school place on time. The places must also be suitable to their needs and give them the very best start in life. People will know that, come September, when the term has started, we will deal with families whose kids have still not been placed. The trauma, stress and worry that that causes is wholly unacceptable.

Despite the pressures facing the special educational school system in South Down, we are lucky, as many Members have said, to have a number of schools providing top-class services to meet the needs of pupils. St Malachy's Primary School, St Malachy's High School in Castlewellan and St Louis in Kilkeel all offer excellent special educational needs provision. Sadly, that is not enough to meet current demand.

It is fantastic that planning will begin on the new Knockevin Special School. That will be transformative for children with special educational needs right across South Down. I and my colleagues will continue to work with all parties to ensure that that vital project is delivered.

I acknowledge and welcome the Minister's recent announcement on the capital build programme for special schools. While it is wholly welcome, and we support it, it is a long-term project, and it will be of little comfort to families who are still unsure whether their child will have a place this September. More needs to be done to ensure that our special educational school system meets the needs of children and their families. Sinn Féin has constantly called for an overhaul of the SEN system to ensure that it meets the needs of children and their families. We must ensure that SEN is a priority. I urge the Education Minister to work with the Health Minister and others to transform SEN services, so that children in South Down and right across the North will have their needs met properly.

If the Minister takes anything away from the debate, it should be this: I echo the call for him to adopt a SEN-first approach; to acknowledge that there is a crisis in SEN provision; and to direct the necessary resources to rectify the situation. Only then can children who need SEN provision and their families truly be served.

Ms Hunter: I thank Cathy Mason and her party for securing this important Adjournment debate, and I welcome the opportunity to speak as SDLP spokesperson on education. I begin by paying tribute to the tremendous local organisation that has been done by the parents in SEN Reform NI, which has been incredible. Despite being established only less than a year ago, that group has provided such incredible advocacy and support for parents and guardians of children who have special educational needs. My colleague Colin McGrath has updated me on the great work that the group is doing, in addition to what we have heard about at the Education Committee.

We must recognise that special educational needs provision in South Down has taken a significant leap forward in the past few weeks with the announcement of a new build for Knockevin Special School. If we do not recognise that, we do a disservice to those who have campaigned, fought and worked for that service for many years. The news from a few weeks ago that the Minister entered Knockevin Special School into the planning stage for a new school, following a visit to the school,

which Colin McGrath was proud to host, will be transformative for students, staff and associated families. Staff there often have to deal with students who have the highest level of special educational needs, and the question becomes this: where do pupils with moderate learning disabilities or mild learning disabilities attend school? That has been a real issue in the constituency.

We do not often have all the necessary data available, given that the Education Authority records numbers by council area and not by constituency. However, the data that it has provided details that, across the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area, there are almost 17,000 children with a special educational need or disability. That is a really significant number. We see that pupils who have a mild to moderate learning disability are often attending mainstream schools. As a result, we have the ongoing consultation on specialist provision in mainstream schools and the associated consultation on specialist provision in mainstream classes, which will be undertaken. That process should, ideally, identify the services and infrastructure that are required in each school in order to ensure that all pupils' needs are being met. However, I ask the Minister to answer the question of how we can ensure that the specialist provision classes that are delivered in our mainstream schools and settings are fully integrated into the school community and not just seen as a space for those with a learning disability but, rather, as the right the place to meet their needs and provide them with the right services.

When we are discussing special educational needs, we find that, very often the focus is on education, but we cannot forget that those with special educational needs have a variety of health needs. I have mentioned before in the House that our classroom assistants are so important as well because they meet those medical needs in the school setting. I have been very concerned recently to learn that there is only a small number of special education schools that have a dedicated school nurse in post. That means that complex health needs are often met by school staff or classroom assistants, who are not always comfortable carrying out those roles. That is not a sustainable position, and work needs to be done with the Health Minister to look at how we address it.

In conclusion, we all know that there are huge challenges across the North regarding special educational needs provision. Specifically, as was mentioned, South Down has a particular need. There is much work to be done, and

there are positive indications of progress, as I detailed. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response, and I thank him for being here. Again, I thank Sinn Féin for securing the debate.

Mr Mathison: I also thank Cathy Mason for securing Adjournment debate on what is a very important issue for South Down and across Northern Ireland. I would like to draw attention to the remarks that a number of Members made on the pay and grading review for classroom assistants and on the upcoming strike action that is now facing our schools across Northern Ireland. I think that parents across the whole region, including in South Down, where we know that there are particular pressures, will be very concerned.

I hope that, in his remarks, the Minister will be able to address the work that is ongoing on engagement with the unions in order to try to address that impending strike action, as well as the level of engagement with the Treasury to see where we are on securing the necessary resource. There was universal disappointment that the money was not found in the Budget for that vital review. Without the workforce — our excellent support staff — to deliver SEN services, we can make capital announcements and do many, many things, but it does not count for much. As my colleague Andrew McMurray said, it is great to get a new building, but you must have the staff to deliver the service.

I do not want to come across as overly negative, but there are real concerns that, if we do not tackle the workforce issue, the whole agenda for reform of SEN services will be really jeopardised.

6.30 pm

I was keen to speak in the debate as Alliance education spokesperson but also as an MLA whose constituency borders South Down and is soon to get a good chunk of South Down. Sorry, Cathy; I am sure that we are getting all the good bits. Following those boundary changes, I will see a lot of the areas that we are talking about come directly into my constituency. There are issues with SEN provision across Northern Ireland, and access to places for September 2024 is under severe pressure. However, South Down has been identified as one of the areas with a particular set of pressures. That was confirmed by the Minister to the Assembly on 30 April in response to a question for oral answer on the matter.

I welcome the interventions that we have had from the Minister recently in relation to capital moneys being made available for a SEN capital programme. We have had lots of references to Knockevin Special School, which has outgrown the capacity at its two sites. The Minister also referred to the possibility of an extension at Rathore School, and a lot of children from South Down would fall into the catchment area for that school. I would be keen for the Minister to give us more detail on the timelines for the roll-out of that programme of investment for Knockevin, Rathore and any other schools in the South Down area that may benefit. In the educational space, there are often capital investment announcements and photo opportunities at schools, but then we wait many years for shovels to hit the ground. We know that the budgetary position is challenging, so it would be great to hear from the Minister how he sees the timeline for that investment programme.

While capital investment in special schools is welcome and special provision is only one element of a complex picture, wider long-term reform, shaped by the end-to-end review of SEN, must be progressed, resourced and prioritised by the Minister if we are to move off the crisis footing in SEN provision. Anyone who has taken the time to watch the Education Committee recently will know that the debate about whether we are experiencing a crisis is a little controversial. I am not into scaremongering or trying to panic parents, but, whatever language we use, the situation is serious and needs to be taken seriously. Again, it would be welcome to hear from the Minister about the pressures facing medium- to long-term SEN provision in South Down. I thank him for his presence in the Chamber. What assurances can he give on the reform agenda and the end-to-end review? When will we see an action plan arising out of that? There is concern that the review could drag on for many months. We really need to see an action plan on what delivery will look like.

Of course, we have that immediate crisis: it is facing us in September, which is getting closer by the day. For parents across South Down and more widely across the region there is genuine anxiety about whether a place will be found for their child and whether that place will be appropriate, which is the crucial consideration. I am aware of the substantial amount of work going on between the EA and schools to establish specialist provisions and the places that are required. I wish them well with that work, and a lot of schools are stepping up to come into that space and try to meet the need. However, families in areas of SEN pressure like

South Down should not have their child's placement dealt with as part of an annual rolling programme of emergency response. The Department and the EA must get ahead of the issue. The necessary planning must be done and the necessary investment must go in so that we do not find ourselves in this situation again. I mean that sincerely: I do not want to be in the Chamber in a year's time debating the same issues. I want us to have got ahead of the issue.

I want to back the Department and the EA in that work, but we need to see clear actions and see how that will be delivered. We need to see the Department and the EA working meaningfully in partnership with health colleagues. We need to see them planning effectively so that we can, as the Department has rightly called for in recent weeks, get the right support from the right people in the right place at the right time. I think that we are all behind that agenda, and I hope that we can see it rolled out in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you. All Members who indicated that they wished to speak have done so, so I call the Minister of Education to respond to the debate.

Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate. Due to the increasing demand for specialist education provision, the situation for September of this year remains challenging across Northern Ireland, so I thank Cathy Mason for bringing forward the Adjournment debate and the Members who have made a contribution to it. The debate touched on issues that are relevant across Northern Ireland.

My comments will touch on those, but, of course, the debate is primarily focused on South Down. I will not be able to go into detail on some of the broader issues today. However, the Assembly has debated those issues, and I have spoken at length on them in the House. I am happy to do so again, in that broader context, in the future.

Let me provide some detail on those wider issues. The latest Education Authority planning assumptions indicate that almost 5,800 children with a statement of special educational needs required a change of or new placement for September this year, with almost 1,000 additional places needed to meet that demand. Significant progress has been made by the Education Authority, working with my Department, on agreeing solutions with schools to meet that demand through the creation of

additional capacity in special schools and new specialist provision in mainstream schools classes. The Education Authority is working closely with sectoral partners and schools to build this necessary capacity into the entire system, and it estimates that some 140 special school classes and 100 specialist provision in mainstream schools classes are required for September, with particular pressure again at nursery and primary 1 levels.

In an effort to identify existing capacity and readiness, my Department recently asked all schools in Northern Ireland to complete a short survey detailing what resources and support would be needed to stand up classes for September and beyond. I am delighted that there has been a very positive response to the survey, with over 700 schools responding within a very short window to do so. Many indicated a willingness to stand up provision to meet the needs of children in their local community. The results of the survey are being analysed, and that analysis will form a solid evidence base for ensuring that there are sufficient places in the education system, not just for September but beyond. I will update the House further on progress in the coming weeks.

Additionally, the ongoing end-to-end review of special educational needs will inform the wider transformation of the whole system, ensuring that children with special educational needs have access to high-quality education and receive the right support delivered by the right people at the right time and in the right place. "Place" is the operative word. It is vital that appropriate places exist for children with statements of special educational needs and that those places are planned in line with the projected need. Therefore, my recent statement to the Assembly indicated the biggest step change to capital planning in a generation, demonstrating my commitment to an ambitious, far-reaching and long-term plan that will require sustained and increased capital investment of around half a billion pounds over the next 10 years. It will lead to increased capacity for special education provision to ensure that every child and young person is happy, learning and succeeding in their educational journey. The capital programme will be transformative for the education system and the lives of our most vulnerable children and their families. It is a priority for my Department to move planning for special educational needs placements from the reactionary year-on-year position to a strategic footing, ensuring that the growing numbers of learners with special educational needs have timely access to appropriate education placements that meet their needs.

That process has already commenced with the publication of the EA's special schools and specialist provision in mainstream area planning frameworks in October 2021 and the first-ever regional plan for special education. Titled 'Planning for Special Education Provision: Strategic Area Plan 2022-27', it is commonly known as SESAP. The outworkings of SESAP will be captured in the Education Authority's 'Operational Plan 2', which is being developed and will put the special educational needs learner at the centre.

Improving strategic area planning for specialist provision is one of a number of actions to ensure that there are sufficient places for children with special educational needs. Collectively, improving sustainability across our entire school estate, the end-to-end review of special educational needs, the development of an inclusion policy and the recent announcement of a bespoke special needs programme will deliver and secure a better future for all our children with special educational needs across Northern Ireland.

I appreciate the Member's commitment to securing sufficient special education provision in South Down, which the EA has identified as an area of particular pressure, with additional places required in special schools and in specialist provision in mainstream schools. I can confirm that 60 schools in the South Down constituency responded to the recent survey from my officials, over half of which have indicated a willingness to establish new or further provision for September of this year and beyond. You will be aware that capital investment was announced for planning for a much-needed new build for Knockevin Special School. All Members who spoke cited that, and Diane Forsythe and Colin McGrath invited me to visit that school. It was both humbling and a pleasure when I spoke to the principal to advise her that work will commence immediately on the planning that is necessary for the new school.

The Education Authority has also been asked to submit proposals for any required extensions to special schools. Those will now be taken forward in the school enhancement programme, and it is envisaged that they will include Rathore School, which the Chair of the Committee, Nick, mentioned. That school is in the neighbouring constituency of Newry and Armagh, but, as he pointed out, it provides special school provision for some children from South Down. Additional land has recently been purchased beside the school, which should provide the growing space that will be necessary. The Education Authority is in

discussion with Rathore School regarding potential expansion options for September of this year.

A number of solutions have also been agreed in the wider Downpatrick area to provide early years and foundation-stage specialist provision classes for children with severe learning difficulties, as Knockevin Special School has limited capacity for new admissions in the September 2024 school year. Expansion of the provision at Oakwood School's Saintfield site for September 2024 is also actively being progressed. Furthermore, four schools in South Down have confirmed the establishment of new or additional specialist provision in mainstream school classes for September.

I assure Members that I, of course, recognise the challenges in the South Down area. Equally, I commend all the special schools, which Members have all spoken highly of, for their education of children for whom mainstream education is not suitable, as well as all the schools that have embraced the opportunity to establish specialist provision to reflect needs in their communities. They enhance the entire school community through the inclusion of our most vulnerable learners.

I will pick up on a couple of the points that Members raised in relation to the allied health professionals and engaging with the Department of Health. I assure Members that we engage with the Department of Health to make sure that there is provision, which includes speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists, all of whom are critical to our engagement. I agree with Members and associate myself with their remarks in paying tribute to our support staff, who carry out an invaluable service for those most in need.

The Budget that was agreed by the Executive, which will come to the House in a number of weeks, highlighted the desire to seek a resolution to the issue of the pay and grading review. I supported the business case for that, and the Department of Finance has approved it. I have asked the Minister of Finance to engage with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. The Minister of Finance will engage with the Treasury to try to repurpose funding that will be available in future years. It is for the Finance Minister to engage with the Treasury on that issue, but we will continue to try to find a resolution. My deputy permanent secretary has met the trade unions twice. Obviously, I do not support strike action, and I hope that all Members will join me in saying that. Strike action will lead to the closure of special schools,

and it will be the most vulnerable children who bear the brunt of strike action. I appeal to the unions not to proceed with that.

6.45 pm

The Education Authority is the employing authority with respect to the staff. It has asked the unions for a derogation in respect of the strike action, so that the measures that are being taken do not impact on the most vulnerable children. I appeal to the unions to provide that derogation when it comes to the most vulnerable in society. I hope that they listen to that.

I have engaged with the Education Authority's chief executive today. I have engaged with the chairman of the Education Authority to ensure that contingency plans are being put in place so that we mitigate the impacts of the strike action. Examinations are taking place, and we need to ensure that measures are in place to allow them to proceed. As we continue to try to resolve the situation, I do not believe that it is appropriate for strike action to take place in respect of the issue. I will continue to update Members in respect of the issue as events take place in the days and weeks ahead.

Obviously, there has been debate about whether there is a crisis. I am clear that, for a family that does not get a place for their child in September, it is a crisis. I also recognise that there are systemic issues when it comes to special educational needs that the Chairman has rightly highlighted as being serious. That is why, since taking up office, I have sought to put in place measures recognising the challenges so that we can get ourselves on the front foot. I have outlined some of the measures that my Department is taking, not just in the short term but so that we get ahead of those challenges in the long term. We are taking forward a number of work streams to put us in proper shape in respect of that.

The issue has my attention. It is a priority. I welcome the positive way in which Members are engaging on it. We are making progress and will continue to do so. Hopefully, I have outlined some of the measures that have been taken in South Down. I am happy to continue to provide updates to Members and the House as appropriate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you for that response to the debate, Minister.

Adjourned at 6.47 pm.