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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 15 April 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Kingsmills Inquest

Mr Speaker: Jim Allister has been given leave to make a statement on the Kingsmills inquest, fulfilling 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 to speak on the subject. I remind Members that interventions are not permitted. I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has concluded.

Mr Allister: In the annals of the IRA's brutal campaign, Kingsmills stands out for so many reasons, but it is the ultimate epitome of the IRA's evil, sectarian murder campaign. I welcome that, on Friday, at the conclusion of the long-running coroner's inquest, the coroner called out the IRA as those who were responsible for that wicked deed, even though it had tried to obfuscate and pretend, by the use of false names, that it was someone else.

I am also glad that the coroner called out the IRA's blatantly sectarian motivation and its attempt to frustrate, through non-cooperation, the coroner's process. Yet, on Friday, Mr Gerry Kelly, a Member of the House, had the brazen effrontery to say that the Kingsmills victims were entitled to the truth — the truth, which his IRA has withheld all these years. I am also glad that the coroner called out the fact that the appalling situation at Kingsmills was under the control and direction of the IRA army council. That is the same IRA army council that oversees and directs Sinn Féin, according to police intelligence, and the same IRA army council, therefore, that oversees and directs the First Minister, hence why, as its puppet, she can never condemn the IRA and, indeed, tells us that there was no alternative.

No alternative to taking 10 men off a bus and shooting them down like dogs because they

were Protestants? I salute the courage and the campaign of the survivor, Mr Alan Black.

There are also criticisms to be made of the coroner's inquest. There was an appalling failure to name the dead perpetrators, Colm Murphy, Seamus Heuston, the ringleader, and Patrick O'Kane. There was an appalling treatment of the secret evidence taken in Dublin: the Irish Government, although they demand full transparency in Northern Ireland, have legislation whereby evidence is taken in secret, and then a summary, not even the actual evidence, is published by the coroner to provide and maximise the opportunity for a cover-up in all of that. In those circumstances, it is quite clear that a public inquiry is now required.

Mr Speaker: Time is up, Mr Allister.

Mr Allister: That, I trust, will have the support of the House.

Mr Buckley: January 5, 1976 marks one of the most barbaric and dark days of the Northern Ireland Troubles. Ten innocent men were lined up on the side of a south Armagh road and put to the sword by the Provisional IRA. I pay tribute to the sole survivor of that attack, Alan Black, whom I spoke to again just this morning. Eighteen times he was shot, and, for over 48 years, he has fought in the pursuit of justice for those families. His words are:

"They are crying out from the grave, and I hear them."

Friday brought an end to an eight-year inquest into those killings, and there is some warm evidence to show that, yes, it was an action of the Provisional IRA that was authorised by the army council and planned long in advance. Whilst these findings help that family, who may have felt the cold, dark veil of silence from that organisation over many years, many questions are still unanswered. The family now feel that a public inquiry is needed, and we support that call. We call publicly on the Police Ombudsman

to publish its report and allow, without delay, its findings to be published in order to allow this process to continue. We support that family and call out the British Government and, indeed, the Irish Government, who have abjectly failed the victims of IRA violence and the victims of the wider Troubles in Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister also pointed to the silence of those who give the Provisional IRA political cover, namely Sinn Féin. There was silence and no cooperation with the inquest. Do Sinn Féin's actions match its words? Let us look at its actions, whether the taunting of victims when a Sinn Féin MP placed a loaf of Kingsmill bread on his head; the naming of a children's play park after the terrorist Raymond McCreesh, who was named in the inquest as having fingerprints on some of the very guns that were used not only in this atrocity but, indeed, others; or Gerry Kelly's statement, which talked about victims deserving the truth about Kingsmills. This was from a victim maker. The truth lies within its ranks, and I encourage it now, even at this stage, to please cooperate. Give Alan Black and the family the justice that they deserve — the truth that they are calling for. As for the First Minister for all, where is she today? Was there an alternative? Surely there was an alternative to what can be described only as an act of genocide.

Mr Beattie: The Kingsmills massacre of 5 January 1976 was truly appalling, sectarian murder. To be lined up, shot in the back and felled to the ground, some wounded, only for somebody to go along to shoot them in the head is unimaginable. It came on the day after the appalling murder of the members of the Reavey and O'Dowd families, and we cannot forget that. However, that is not an excuse, because this was planned well in advance of those murders. We cannot cherry-pick on this. Both were appalling. All were appalling.

I have written to the Secretary of State to ask him to have an inquiry and to make it public, because the people need to know. People need to know about the secret discourse between the coroner and the Irish Government. They refused to allow the families and their solicitors to attend when the information was given. That was not transparency. We needed that transparency to give confidence to the families. The lack of it is what led to nine of the families withdrawing from the process. We need to address that.

We also need to address the words of the coroner, who said that this was a sectarian murder perpetrated by the IRA and its political representatives. Its political representatives

were Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin refused to engage with the coroner's court or with the courts. Its Ministers refused to uphold the pledge of office; that pledge clearly states that they will support the police and the courts, but they did not. Some have said that this is the time for an apology, and I am someone who says that, when you give an apology, it is up to the victims and others in wider society to decide whether to accept it, but the reality is that an apology would be hollow, and this is why: you cannot spend 10 years failing to engage with a process to give information to the victims and families, and then apologise afterwards. It is simply not right.

We have an opportunity now to start engaging and giving information to the families about this. We have an opportunity to make sure that we adhere to the pledge of office that we make when we become Ministers. If you do not do it, they are purely words, and words are absolutely no basis for government. I ask them all to reflect on that. I have also written to the Justice Minister to ask for her adjudication on that issue.

Mrs Dillon: I am sorry for the lives lost at Kingsmills; for the loss of the O'Dowd and Reavey families, as referred to by Doug Beattie, during that awful time; and for all the families who lost loved ones in the conflict. The Kingsmills families are entitled to truth and justice. In recent weeks, a number of inquests, including Kingsmills, involving families — Sean Brown's family, Fergal McCusker's family, Seamus Dillon's family and the Coagh families — have clearly pointed to the need to tackle the legacy of the past to meet families' needs. In 2014, the two Governments and the main Assembly parties signed up to the Stormont House Agreement, which included mechanisms to ensure that families can access truth and justice. The British Government should repeal their shameful legacy Act and implement the Stormont House Agreement. Over a number of years, I have met many families across the political spectrum who lost people whom they loved and still love, killed by people from all backgrounds. All those families, without exception, deserve to have the truth, to have justice and to have peace in their lives.

Miss McAllister: I rise to mark not only what passed at the end of last week but an abhorrent, disgusting and shameful action by the IRA on 5 January 1976. Most importantly today, I pay tribute to the sole survivor and to the families of those who perished in the Kingsmills massacre.

I learned about the massacre as a young adult. Having not heard about it until my late teens, I could not believe that it had actually taken place. It is another shameful reminder of the actions of the IRA and the brutality of the sectarianism of our past. It is very unfortunate that we remain in circumstances in which families and the sole survivor are not happy and are still searching for truth and justice. In the days and, unfortunately, years that followed, they were marked by that search for truth and justice and, most importantly, by the courage of Alan Black, as he had the courage to go back to the scene of the crime not long after recovery. That spoke volumes about his determination then. Now, at 80 years old, he still stands strong in speaking for the legacy of his friends and colleagues.

Let us be clear, however, that it is only through truth, transparency, the accountability of all involved and the pursuit of justice will those families finally be at peace.

12.15 pm

Mr O'Toole: The Kingsmills massacre, which happened 48 years ago, was a grotesque sectarian slaughter. It was a grotesque sectarian slaughter in the same way as the Reavey and O'Dowd murders, which happened the night before, were. As others have said, however, and as was said at the inquest, the Kingsmills massacre took significant planning ahead of time. When we talk about these issues, it is vital that we do not seek to score political points about what happened in the past, but we do need to be specific and direct about the appalling actions of the IRA, other paramilitary organisations and, at times, the state. As other Members have done, I pay tribute to the dignity and courage of Alan Black, a man now aged 80 and not in the best of health, who has been a voice for decency and truth for almost half a century.

What happened all those years ago in 1976 was as disgusting and reprehensible an act of sectarian slaughter as it is possible to imagine. Men were ordered off a minibus, identified by their religion and then gunned down. That has been exacerbated not only by the absence of truth and justice for half a century since but by the fact that, in plain language, the IRA, which is the organisation that everyone knows was responsible for that outrage, has never formally acknowledged that it was responsible. It is therefore important that all of us who talk about these things be careful and precise with our words. Awful things happened during the Troubles. Awful things were done by

paramilitary organisations and, at times, the state. There are people on various sides of our political divide, and people who were on various sides of the conflict, who wish to draw a veil over the appalling actions that took place during that conflict. Although it is important that our politics not be defined by the past — we have all agreed and signed up to a process of moving on, working together and building something better — it is important that we do not simply submit to attempts, including that by the UK Government through their appalling legacy Act, to draw a gauzy veil over the past and blur what happened. To do that would be to fail people such as Alan Black and the families of the other victims of the Kingsmills massacre. We should therefore reflect on how awful that atrocity was, the unacceptability of the UK Government's action and the fact that we all, in this society and in this place, need to underline our commitment to real truth, real justice and real reconciliation in order to move forward.

Mr Irwin: I, along with my colleagues, saw at first hand on Friday the pain and hurt of the Kingsmills families. The coroner's deliberations were stark: the gunmen ordered 12 workmen off a work minibus and told the one Catholic to run. The bloodthirsty murderers not only shot those men but shot them again as they lay on the ground dying. One man, Alan Black, survived, even though he was shot 18 times. I pay tribute to Alan for his dignity over many years. All that Alan wants is justice. Not one person has ever been brought to book for those horrendous murders. I stand with my colleagues in calling for an independent inquiry. We need to know the truth about what happened, and we need to see results and answers.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I welcome the opportunity to stand here today with so many and mark that appalling atrocity. Over the years, it has been my huge privilege to work with so many families, victims and survivors, including some of those who were affected by the IRA massacre at Kingsmills.

I pay tribute not only to the families of Kingsmills who have had to battle incredibly hard, justice being denied, but to all families who have done the same. Throughout Northern Ireland there are many thousands of victims and their families who have never had justice. Like so many victims and survivors, that hurt and pain continues to this day.

There are many who say that we need simply to move on, but we can never move on while forgetting the incredible sacrifice that was made

and the terrible, appalling actions of the past. I want to be clear here today. The coroner confirmed what many people knew already: the IRA Kingsmills massacre was sectarian. There was never any justification. It was, in my view, a war crime. Terrorism was always wrong, and there was always an alternative.

Mr McNulty: The Kingsmills massacre was a brutally designed act, with the sole objective of slaughtering totally innocent human beings for obscene motives. There is no justification, none whatsoever, for what happened on the south Armagh roadside that night. The cruelty of that night has been permanently etched into the soul and fabric of the community that I represent.

I am sick, sore and tired of the sickening triumphalism that comes courtesy of the so-called commemorative events carefully orchestrated by those who try to make murderers into martyrs for political advantage. There are those in this place who would prefer to try to forget that their political philosophy provided the cornerstone for the delivery of that terrible cruelty that shattered so many lives. Until Sinn Féin's leadership and its representatives are prepared to accept their responsibility for their direct role in the savagery and butchery of Kingsmills — indeed, for so many other atrocities across these islands — nothing will change. Nothing will change the pain that so many souls have to live with every single day. Not in my name. There was always an alternative.

I pay tribute to Alan Black. I met Alan Black at his house in Bessbrook to discuss a united Ireland and my party's vision for a united Ireland. Alan said to me:

"Justin, I'll talk to you all day about a united Ireland, but see that crowd — never. I never want any part of their united Ireland."

Alan Black said, "never", and I want a different united Ireland, not one that celebrates, glorifies and romanticises terrorism.

Mr Nesbitt: I am reminded of a quiet discussion that I had as party leader with the late Martin McGuinness about the use of violence. I put it to him that if you pick up a gun, as the murderers of Kingsmills did, you make a choice. You choose to pick it up, so there was an alternative. Martin's response was:

"Ah, but you didn't grow up in Derry" —

as he called it —

"the way I did",

and that is true. I said:

"Yes, you're right, Martin, but John Hume did".

John Hume was the only man on this planet to be awarded the Martin Luther King Jnr Non-Violent Prize, the Mahatma Gandhi Peace Prize and the Nobel Peace Prize. He made a choice — a choice to pursue non-violent means. That was the same late Martin McGuinness who appeared before the Saville inquiry into Bloody Sunday, and said there were things that he would not disclose because, as a member of the Provisional IRA, he had a code that trumped providing information to the loved ones about what happened on Bloody Sunday.

That reminds me of the Smithwick Tribunal of Inquiry in the Republic into the murders of RUC men Harry Breen and Bob Buchanan. Mr Justice Smithwick was very clear in his conclusions. The IRA engaged on their own terms. They took their time, and they chose to engage in writing. They would not subject themselves to oral cross-examination. They would not engage properly and fully with that inquiry.

I am also minded of leading our delegation in the Stormont House talks. One day, we were discussing the flow of information from the Republic to Northern Ireland. I asked an official from the Department of Justice in Dublin, who only appeared once, about the flow of intelligence. The Irish Government were very keen to say that information will come from the Garda Commissioner, unredacted, to the Chief Constable of the Police Service. My question was, "If it were coming from G2, the Irish Army's intelligence unit, to the Garda Commissioner, could the head of G2 redact it before it got to the Irish police?". He said, "Yes, he could. The head of G2 could redact it before it got into that information flow". That was the last time that that gentleman was allowed to take part in the Stormont House talks.

I am saying two things: there was an alternative — of course there was — to choosing to pick up a gun; and we have a duty, which is unfulfilled as yet, to deliver full truth and justice to the victims.

Members' Statements

Mr Speaker: If Members wish to be called to make a statement, they should rise in their place. Members who are called will have up to three minutes to make their statement. I remind Members that interventions are not permitted. I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until this item of business is finished.

PSNI: Bangor Public Enquiry Office Closure

Mr Dunne: I rise to express my real disappointment and anger at the decision of the PSNI to close the public enquiry office in Bangor police station. The decision is a backward step for the police and will, unfortunately, mean a real reduction in the service to our local community. It will leave the entire North Down constituency, which has a population of over 90,000, without a publicly accessible police station. The decision gives cause for concern and alarm regarding accessibility to the station and, consequently, to the local policing team.

It is important that the police do all in their power to ensure that they are visible and accessible to everyone across the north Down area. We saw the closure of Donaghadee police station in 2012 and the closure to the public of Holywood police station a few years later. There is real concern now that north Down is a soft target for policing cutbacks. I have written to the Chief Constable urging him to urgently reconsider this plan, which sends out the wrong message to our local community.

Whilst I appreciate the significant financial challenges facing the Police Service of Northern Ireland, I do not believe that cutting this service to the public is the most effective and efficient way of making savings. It does not improve or increase confidence in our Police Service. Whilst no final date has been announced, it is expected that the closure will take place in the next few months. That will undoubtedly be a real inconvenience to many, including those who want to use the public-facing enquiry facility to report a crime or incident in person, present with legal documentation, organise street or charity collections, or fulfil bail requirements.

Bangor and the wider north Down area has a growing population and many new housing developments. This closure really sends out the wrong message from the Police Service of

Northern Ireland about their engagement and accessibility within and across our local communities. A visible police presence across our local area is essential to deter criminals and, importantly, to reassure the law-abiding public that the police are there when we need them most. I urge the Chief Constable to reconsider this move and ensure that north Down gets the policing service that it rightly expects and deserves.

Ballynahinch Bypass: Urgent Need

Mrs Mason: You will all be aware that, last week, there was another road traffic accident in Ballynahinch, which resulted in the tragic death of a 70-year-old man. I extend my deepest condolences to his family and friends and the wider community. I also want to pay tribute to the emergency services for their efforts at the scene. The entire community is shocked and heartbroken by this unfortunate incident. It is yet another sad reminder of the pressing need to move forward and deliver a Ballynahinch bypass. That scheme would greatly improve transport connectivity in the local community and, of course, the wider south Down area.

The challenges facing our road networks are a direct impact of the chronic underinvestment in these institutions by the British Government. That underinvestment is now costing lives. We need the British Government to step up and adequately fund this place. We need more capital to invest in major infrastructure projects in order to deliver for our communities.

12.30 pm

Historical Institutional Abuse: Redress for Victims and Survivors

Ms Bradshaw: I rise to bring attention to the fact that we are still failing the victims and survivors of historical institutional childhood abuse in Northern Ireland. Since being appointed as Chair of the Executive Office Committee, I have met victims and survivors, listened to their stories and felt the very raw anger and frustration that they continue to experience.

Last week, the Committee heard evidence from the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse, Survivors North West, the Rosetta Trust and Survivors and Victims of Institutional Abuse (SAVIA), and I thank them all for their contributions and time.

I want to highlight a particular concern that they all raised, which is that, 14 years after the religious orders and institutions were put on notice that they would be obliged to make a redress and recognition contribution, and seven years on from the publication of the Hart inquiry report, the institutions responsible for systematically causing harm through what were plainly criminal acts against children have not contributed one single penny in Northern Ireland. The victims and survivors of that childhood abuse want and deserve accountability from them.

At a previous Committee meeting, we heard from a TEO official who advised that an independent facilitator had been appointed and that two institutions were ready in mid February, and two were close behind, to make a contribution. Since then, we have not seen any movement. Quite frankly, I think that that is just lip service. We need to see firm action.

We know that £90 million has been paid out so far in redress. However, that does not include associated costs, nor does it cover the cost of specialist services that the victims and survivors have rightly accessed. We know that children who have adverse childhood experiences will, unfortunately, experience poor health outcomes in later life. It is therefore even more important that the religious orders contribute to redress, without any further delay, for the pain, suffering and abuse that they perpetrated against all the innocent, vulnerable children.

Of the people who made allegations to the Hart inquiry, the largest number spoke about experiences in four homes run by the Sisters of Nazareth and two homes run by the De La Salle Order. The inquiry also looked at three homes run by the Good Shepherd Sisters, a Church of Ireland home, two secular homes run by Barnardo's, five local authority homes and five juvenile justice institutions. There were allegations against 65 institutions or homes in total. In closing, I also want to put those institutions and homes on notice. As Chair of the Executive Office Committee, I will not let the issue go. It is a priority for me, and I will come back to it time and again until it is resolved to the satisfaction of victims and survivors.

Alt Text

Mr Butler: I would like to speak briefly and, hopefully, in good humour about something that vexes me on a daily basis. Most will know that I am chair of the all-party group on disability and the all-party group on visual impairment. I make this serious plea, wrapped in a sprinkle of a

humour and a dash of compassion. I am here to talk about alt text — that unsung hero of accessibility in the digital realm.

Picture this: you are scrolling through your favourite social media platform, chuckling at memes and admiring travel photos, when suddenly you encounter a post without alt text. It is like being handed a mysterious package with no label: you have no clue what is inside it. Now, imagine experiencing that every day: the vibrant online world becomes like a silent movie for those with visual impairments. It is like attending a concert with your ears plugged, which would not be quite the same experience. However, fear not, my fellow MLAs, alt text is here to save the day. Like a trusty sidekick in our quest for inclusivity, it is the superhero cape for our digital content, providing descriptions that empower everyone to join the party.

Speaking of superheroes, let me take a moment to salute my pesty bestie, the champion of alt text awareness, whom many of you will have become aware of over the past few months. With the wit of a stand-up comedian and the heart of a philanthropist, she, along with her friends, has tirelessly campaigned for a more inclusive online world. She is the Gandalf to our fellowship, guiding us through the dark tunnels of ignorance towards the shining beacon of greater inclusivity.

Let us embrace alt text like a warm hug on a chilly day, with open arms and a twinkle in our eyes. Let us make our digital spaces a playground where everyone can engage freely, regardless of their disability or ability. Together, we can turn the tide of exclusion into a sea of inclusivity, one alt text at a time. Thank you, Mr Speaker. May the alt text be with you.

Lough Neagh Eel Fishermen

Mr Kearney: The ecological catastrophe on Lough Neagh is an environmental crisis for the region, but it has also been a financial disaster for the commercial fishermen and their families, who rely on the lough for their income. The eel fishing season normally lasts for six months. Last year, it lasted only six weeks, meaning that there was massive financial devastation for our freshwater fishing industry in the lough.

The eel fishing season will resume on 1 May, and local fishermen will not be able to sustain financial losses such as they experienced last year. We need a robust cross-departmental and inter-agency plan that not only tackles the crisis in Lough Neagh but addresses the financial hardship that fishermen have experienced and

ensures that they will not be exposed to similar financial pressures this year. I will write directly to the AERA Minister to highlight that priority.

Rory Carlin

Mr McCrossan: I rise to pay tribute to the family and friends of the late Rory Carlin, the first anniversary of whose death is on 7 May. Rory passed away in very difficult and tragic circumstances last year, leaving behind a devastated family and community that were deeply shocked by his death. In the face of such difficulty and adversity, his family have campaigned over a difficult year to raise awareness of the impact of drugs on mental health. Rory was on the team of Strabane Athletic Football Club, and he was a very polite, lovable and passionate young man. He worked as a scaffolder with his brother and had aspirations to join the Irish Army. His death came as a considerable shock, as such a death would to any family. In the short months that have passed since, the family, along with the community, have raised £65,000. That is a tremendous collective effort that is focused on ensuring that, in the words of his father, Dominic, no other family goes through what they have gone through.

Last year, the Carlin family's world was rocked by the unexpected and sudden death of a son. There are countless families in all our communities that are affected by the scourge of drugs and the battle against addiction. Our society is failing countless young people and those who are not so young who are battling drug addiction, mental health issues and any other addiction. The services are just not there, and those that are cannot cope with the demands that exist.

To raise £65,000 — they are still going — is a tremendous achievement in the face of what has been a very difficult time. The family are adamant that they want to play their part to raise awareness in Rory's memory not just for the community in Strabane but beyond. The truth is that they recognise, like so many young people who have spoken about their challenges with addiction in recent times, that the services are just not there. The money raised is a tremendous achievement that will help countless young people and families.

The House has a responsibility, as do the Executive collectively, to do everything that is in our power to ensure that the young people who are struggling with addiction get the support that they need in these very challenging circumstances.

Stuart Dallas

Mr K Buchanan: I rise to pay tribute to the commitment, dedication and achievements of Stuart Dallas, a lad from Cookstown who rose to the pinnacle of not only local football but top-flight Premiership and international football, including Euro 2016 in France. Stuart grew up in Cookstown and played for Coagh United and Crusaders, winning the Irish League Cup and the Setanta Sports Cup with Crusaders. After being capped at youth level for Northern Ireland, he gained his full senior cap in 2011, when he made his debut against Wales. During his career, he was capped 62 times for Northern Ireland and scored on three occasions.

On Wednesday, Stuart announced his retirement from professional football following injury. Since then, footballers, managers and pundits have all spoken about his ability on the pitch and his commitment to whatever club he was playing for. He finished his professional career with Leeds United, a club that he made 266 appearances for and where he scored 28 goals.

I met Stuart a few years ago in Cookstown when a wall mural was painted of him, Raymond McCoy and Aaron Hughes, all Cookstown men who played for Northern Ireland. I wish Stuart and his family well for the future and thank him for his inspiration to many young footballers in mid-Ulster and Northern Ireland and for the legacy that he has left.

Ballynahinch Bypass: Urgent Need

Mr Mathison: First, I offer my sincere condolences to all those affected by the tragic incident in Ballynahinch last week, and I echo the comments made earlier by Cathy Mason on the tragic incident that resulted in the death of local man Giovanni Buggea. The town is in a state of grief and shock following the terrible incident, and my thoughts are with all Mr Buggea's friends and family at this very difficult time. I am aware that there is an ongoing PSNI investigation into the incident, so my remarks will be about the wider issue of traffic in the town.

The terrible tragedy has highlighted, once again, the high level of local concern about the volume of traffic in the town and the level of frustration with the delays over many years in delivering the much-needed Ballynahinch bypass. The Department for Infrastructure issued a notice of intention to proceed with that project as far back as December 2016, but the

project has been repeatedly delayed since then, not least as a result of long periods of suspension of these institutions when we had no Ministers in place. Last August, locals were dismayed when DFI announced that the project was once again paused, with no timeline for when that would change.

The tragedy last week has only refocused the minds of local people on just how badly Ballynahinch is impacted by high traffic volumes. I have been contacted by many people from the town, who spoke about how it has reminded them of the urgent need for the bypass to be delivered as a priority. I confirm the urgent need for the project on behalf of the residents of Ballynahinch. I hope that the Minister for Infrastructure can finally commence the project and that it can be done in this financial year.

Giovanni Buggea, Ballynahinch

Mr Harvey: Like Cathy Mason and our brother Nick, I wish to remember Giovanni Buggea, who tragically lost his life in a road incident last Monday evening in Ballynahinch. Members will recall the horrific details of the incident that were reported in the press last week. Giovanni was a regular visitor to my constituency office in Ballynahinch. The community miss his presence in the town where he was seen daily walking through the square. He had a welcome smile, a friendly personality and always had time for a chat. On behalf of the Ballynahinch community, I offer my deepest sympathy to Giovanni's family and friends, locally and in Sicily, where he was born and brought up.

A tragic death on our roads again highlights the issues of road safety, and I will continue to lobby the relevant Departments to maximise the safety of those using our roads.

Community Groups

Mr Gildernew: I want to make a brief statement about community groups. All of us fully understand the value and impact of all these groups. I am talking about a full range of groups, from neighbourhood renewal projects to groups working in the fields of health, education, urban and rural regeneration, community relationships and many other vital areas in every area of the North. These groups are struggling with a range of issues. They are struggling financially in the aftermath of reductions in funding and as the result of austerity measures and Brexit. They are also struggling with staffing: staff pay, the availability of staff and continuity of staff. This is in

circumstances where there is also a rising need for the services that they provide.

In my area of Dungannon, the neighbourhood renewal group has done tremendous work. I work with Willowbank, which provides physical disability services, St Vincent de Paul, the Vineyard, COSTA Rural Support Network and all the many groups that we have in our areas. They are really struggling. I look forward, as Chair of the Communities Committee, to working with these groups, because it is vital that we support and reinforce them where we can. They often pick up the services that the public sector is not able to provide. I acknowledge their contribution to the work that we do: we must all work to provide better support for them.

12.45 pm

Farmers: Support

Mrs Erskine: I will speak on a matter that affects a large proportion of the population of Northern Ireland and, indeed, the majority of my constituency: support for farmers. All of us are fed up with the rain and the weather, and none of us can control it, but it is a particular concern for our farming community. Crops have been destroyed in parts of Northern Ireland, and weather can also be a huge factor in relation to slurry. The stress and anxiety on the farming community are huge right now, and I pay tribute to the likes of the Ulster Farmers' Union, which has pushed the need for leniency from banks and for extra support for the farming community.

Farmers are caught in a perfect storm. They are squeezed by margin pressures and energy costs, to name but two issues, and the well-being of our farmers and their families cannot be ignored. I also pay tribute to Rural Support and other agencies that are doing what they can to support the mental health and well-being of families, but our rural community is in peril at this moment because of the pressures. It is, naturally, a critical part of food production and also of our economy. From the Chamber, I pay tribute to the members of the farming community, who are doing what they can in difficult circumstances. Specifically, I say this to farmers: if you are struggling, please do not feel alone. Please do not be afraid to reach out and seek help.

Hospitality Industry: Support

Mr Honeyford: Last night, we heard the terrible news that another restaurant is closing. This

time, sadly, the restaurant, really well known locally, is in my area: Clenaghans, outside Aghalee in Lagan Valley. That follows the announcement only a few weeks ago of the closure of the Owl and Pussycat in Hillsborough; another hugely popular, key hospitality business in my area. I have so many memories from over the years of being in Clenaghans, from the Tuesday night trad sessions to nights with friends and family. The food and service were always incredible, the surroundings were beautiful, and this news is disappointing for the area.

Clenaghans highlights, unfortunately, a problem for our hospitality sector that Ministers need to get a grip on really quickly. The hospitality industry is a hugely important sector of our economy. It generates economic growth and drives investment in all our towns and cities. Our economy needs our hospitality industry to be strong and to grow, and I ask the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Finance to urgently look at and act on the issues that the hospitality sector faces and on which it is crying out for help. This urgently needs all our support at this time.

Health Service: Capacity

Ms McLaughlin: I will speak about a young lady in my constituency whose story I believe deserves to be told in the Assembly. Her name is Zoe. Zoe described her experience in our local hospital, Altnagelvin, as "dehumanising". When Zoe was admitted to A&E for the first time, she was sent home. Admitted for a second time, she was finally triaged after she collapsed in the corridor. She was then placed in one of the 28 escalated bed spaces in the hospital. In reality, that meant that she was in a temporary bed for nine days, in a room without windows, a sink or a door; it was actually the nurses' locker room. Left with a bell to ring when she needed care, Zoe went throughout that time without a shower, and her bed was not changed in nine days. Her personal items were left on the floor of the ward. Her pain was frequently underestimated and, in her words, dismissed many times during her stay.

When you access the health service, you expect to be better when you come out of the other side, but Zoe's experience in our health service has traumatised her. As I speak, she is still in immense pain, left without a proper diagnosis or a treatment plan. I want to be clear that the workers in our health service go above and beyond, every single day. This is not a criticism of them; they are selfless and dedicated professionals. It is, however, a

critique of the service that has let staff and patients down. Patients cannot get the care that they need, while staff cannot provide the care that they want to provide. At this time, our health service is collapsing before our very eyes for people such as Zoe. We talk about transformation, but it is now as much about rebuilding the service as it is about anything else.

I have to say that I really do not see urgency from the Executive on the issue. People are literally in agony. Where is the plan? Where is the change of pace that we need to see from the Health Minister and his colleagues? People here deserve a health service that is free at the point of use, the number of beds that are needed and proper staffing levels to go along with those beds. That includes in Derry, where we urgently need a new A&E department. Our emergency department simply cannot cope, and our local trust is asking for your support. The Department of Health should listen and deliver on that need in the most deprived area of Northern Ireland. That is not too much to ask, and it is the least that people should expect.

Horror stories such as Zoe's should never be allowed to happen in the first place, but it is the responsibility of government to make sure that they never happen again. The Health Minister and the whole Executive must get on with job. There must be an action plan, and they must deliver.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Limavady Rugby Club

Mr Robinson: I will make a short statement in the House today to offer my heartiest congratulations to Limavady Rugby Club, which, on Saturday week ago, won the Junior Shield final at the Kingspan Stadium, having defeated Lurgan Rugby Club 26-19. The route to the final was not easy. In the quarter-final, which was an away match, Limavady swept aside Omagh Accies 61-5. In the semi-final, which was played at the John Hunter Memorial Grounds, Limavady defeated Monaghan 29-17, earning the team a historic trip to the Kingspan.

I pay tribute to Mark Hylands, the director of rugby at Limavady, all the postholders, and the firsts' captain, Ben Riley, who led the club to that fantastic victory. I also pay tribute to all the volunteers who, behind the scenes, make the club tick. They have played their part in bringing silverware to Limavady and in putting the town on the rugby map. To the supporters, who may still feel a little delicate after last weekend's

celebrations, I say, "Here's to many more in the future". Well done, Limavady.

Gaza War

Mr Carroll: Over the weekend, Iran fired some 300 missiles at Israel, and the world watched with bated breath as we awaited the outcome of what could have been a wider confrontation in the Middle East. Today, I call, loudly and clearly, for a de-escalation of violence but also for people to reflect on what has brought us to that point.

For six months now, Israel has been committing genocide in Gaza, the horror of which would have been unimaginable before. Israel has destroyed hospitals, deliberately murdered children, taken thousands of hostages and systematically denied people food, water and medical aid. Israel has killed over 33,000 Palestinians and committed the most heinous war crimes. In that time, Israel has also bombed Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, Iran and Yemen, with the complete backing of Western imperialists in the US, Britain and elsewhere.

I have my own view of the Iranian state. I have stood with my Iranian sisters and brothers here in Belfast under the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom", but its actions over the weekend were in retaliation to Israel's bombing of the Iranian consulate in Damascus.

What we are seeing started with Israel's genocide in Gaza and must end with a ceasefire in Gaza. Israel is a rogue state that has risked a wider regional war with every reckless action that it has taken. Israel and those who continue to support and arm it, including the US and Britain, now have to be responsible for de-escalating the violence. The G7, drawn from the so-called leaders of the democratic world, was quick to defend Israel and talked of guaranteeing peace in the region. As those countries' sophisticated defence systems mopped up Iran's missiles, Israel continued to bombard Gaza overnight with the very weapons that they provide.

Their hypocrisy and Israel's unchallenged barbarity make a mockery of the supposed rules-based international order. Those people will do anything to protect their interests. We have seen it in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and across the globe, so it is up to ordinary people to continue to press home the demands that can bring about peace: boycotts, divestments and sanctions (BDS) against Israel; the British and Irish Governments to expel the Israeli ambassadors; countries to stop arming Israel;

and the US military to get out of Aldergrove and Shannon. The Stormont Executive must now urgently call for an immediate ceasefire.

Mr Speaker: I call Paul Frew. You have two minutes, Paul.

Gaza War

Mr Frew: Mr Speaker, I appreciate that. We are all, I think, horrified at the escalation of the war in the Middle East, with the recent attack that Iran has perpetrated on Israeli soil for the first time in history. We see the horrors that war brings and the innocent victims who suffer war. However, I want to talk about a group of people who have been forgotten about: the 129 people who were lifted from their homes, who witnessed their family being slaughtered on 7 October and who, to this day, remain captive. For more than six months, they have been hidden away underground, in tunnels, with no daylight and very little food, and treated appallingly.

We all can see and think about six months, but those people — the Israeli hostages who were taken by Hamas — fight a war of personal attrition in which they do not know whether they will stay alive for another hour, when they are going to eat or have a sup of water or when they are going to receive medical attention, and they do not know when they are going to be molested again. Think also of their families who sit at home awaiting the safe return of those hostages, not knowing whether they will ever see their loved ones again. Within that number are two babies who were nine months old on 7 October, and no one knows whether they are alive or dead.

Assembly Business

Public Petition: A1 Road Improvements

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

Mr Brown: Thank you Mr Speaker, for giving leave to allow this petition to be presented. The petition consists of 12,738 signatures calling for the completion of A1 road improvements. It was started by Ciara Sands and Monica Heaney of campaign group, A1: How Many Must Die, following the tragic death of Ciara's partner, and Monica's son, Karl Heaney, in May 2018.

Since then, that group has been campaigning tirelessly to see the completion of upgrade works to the A1. It is an exceptionally dangerous road, on which, in the past 17 years, more than 40 lives have been lost. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to all the campaigners and all those who signed the petition and, who, together, have kept the issue high on the public agenda.

The A1 is one of the busiest roads in Northern Ireland. It carries over 40,000 vehicles a day and is a vital North/South transport link on the economic corridor between Dublin and Belfast. However, along the 25 kilometre stretch from Hillsborough to Loughbrickland, it is peppered with junctions from main roads and private accesses and has turning gaps all down the central reserve, creating huge risk for fast-moving vehicles on the dual carriageway. Planned upgrades to that stretch of road have existed since 2007 but, unfortunately, have not been meaningfully progressed. I understand that the business case for the scheme is nearing completion, and that securing adequate budget will be crucial to seeing it progressed in the near future. I therefore call on the Finance Minister to work with the Infrastructure Minister to ensure that works on the scheme can begin soon and ask both Ministers to continue to engage with colleagues in the South to explore additional funding for road safety upgrades on the A1.

I also welcome last week's announcement from DFI that the Department plans to deliver the scheme via smaller, phased packages, which will allow aspects of the scheme to move forward and, hopefully, see the most dangerous parts of the road being prioritised to prevent further tragic loss of life.

Mr Brown moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister for Infrastructure and send a copy to the Committee.

1.00 pm

Committee Membership

Resolved:

That Mr Robbie Butler replace Mr John Stewart as a member of the Business Committee. — [Mr Beattie.]

Mr Speaker: Members may take their ease. The Principal Deputy Speaker will conduct the next item of business, which is a ministerial statement.

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

Ministerial Statement

Defective Premises

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, I have received notice from the Minister for Communities that he wishes to make a statement. I remind the Assembly of the convention that Members who wish to ask a question should be in the Chamber to hear the Minister's statement in its entirety. Before I call the Minister, I would also like to remind Members that they must be concise in asking their questions. This is not an opportunity for debate or long introductions.

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities): We are elected to this place to serve our constituents: to represent their interests and do what we can to help to improve their lives. As we know, that is not always easy, simple or straightforward. Progress can be frustratingly slow, and we often come up against barriers or hurdles to getting things done. However, that is not what our constituents expect. They want action to tackle the most pressing issues that they face.

I want to update the House on the action that I have been taking to deal with an issue that has come to the fore of the public's attention in recent weeks, and requires remedy. The outcome of the recent High Court case pertaining to the apartments at Victoria Square highlighted a range of issues that adversely impact on our people. It acutely highlighted the disparity that exists between the benefits that are enjoyed by citizens elsewhere in the United Kingdom and the lack of those same protections here.

However, the situation also offers the opportunity for the Assembly and Executive to, swiftly and decisively, deliver for people in Northern Ireland. Many in the Chamber will remember the horrifying scenes in London when the Grenfell Tower tragedy claimed the lives of 72 people. Following an independent review in 2018, Parliament began the process of introducing new law to provide adequate legislation and regulations to ensure that citizens and buildings are protected and safe. People in Northern Ireland deserve those same protections.

The High Court case has, however, highlighted that the Limitation (Northern Ireland) Order

1989 permits actions regarding defects in residential buildings to be taken only within a six-year period in Northern Ireland. That compares to a time frame of up to 30 years elsewhere in the United Kingdom. As Minister for Communities with responsibility for housing, I was struck by that disparity in legislation between GB and NI. It places people in Northern Ireland at a clear disadvantage compared with their counterparts in other regions of the UK. It is clear that there is an urgent need for fit-for-purpose legislation that provides improved protection to all those who live in Northern Ireland. That was clear to the public as well.

The public wanted to see action on that disparity, but it was not immediately clear which Minister would take it forward. Although the powers lay with DAERA, Minister Muir had indicated that he believed that it was incorrectly allocated to his Department. Following discussions with Minister Muir, I agreed that my Department would take responsibility for these issues and, last week, gave my consent to the transfer of functions order to move them from DAERA to Communities.

I know that the last thing that the public wanted was for Ministers to fight over who was responsible. I am pleased that my Department was able to step up and take it on. Minister Muir and I subsequently met the Finance Minister. The need for urgency and decisive action was apparent to us. We quickly agreed to a collaborative, constructive approach to achieve urgent resolution to the issues raised. I would like to pay tribute to the cross-party collegiate support and swift action taken by my ministerial colleagues in Agriculture and Finance.

I also want to thank officials in my Department who have been working on this issue. My Department acted swiftly and took on responsibility for residential building safety. The residential building safety division was tasked to bring about this improved building safety policy and legislation, which enhances the residential building safety system for the citizens of Northern Ireland. That team will need additional resources sooner than expected, in order not to delay or impact that significant work.

The extension of the limitation period for defective residential buildings is one of the matters that was already under consideration as part of the Department's review of policy and legislation. However, I recognise the importance of that matter and the necessity to quickly bring us into line with the rest of the UK. Therefore, I am pleased to announce that I intend to bring to the Assembly and Executive,

as a matter of urgency, legislation to provide the same protection associated with defective premises for citizens in Northern Ireland to that afforded elsewhere in the UK.

The proposed Bill will introduce new provisions into the Limitation (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, establishing a retrospective period of up to 30 years and a prospective period of up to 15 years in which a party can take action for defective premises. It will also introduce a new clause into the Defective Premises (Northern Ireland) Order 1975, which will allow a building that contains two or more dwellings to be treated as a single dwelling for the purpose of the order. That will be based on the provisions introduced in England and Wales by sections 134 and 135 of the Building Safety Act 2022.

In order for us to continue to deliver for people here, I am seeking the ongoing and urgent support of my Executive colleagues and this Assembly to ensure the swift passage of this legislation, which will provide Northern Ireland residents with the same recourse and protections as prescribed in other jurisdictions where a building is shown to be defective. Given the urgency, I am writing to Executive colleagues today to seek their support and approval to introduce new legislation under the accelerated passage process. The primary legislation will address the period under which action can be taken with regard to defective buildings and will address the unfair disparity that currently exists and disadvantages our people.

I do not seek consent for the accelerated passage process lightly. I fully respect the right of the Assembly to have the normal time and scrutiny processes. However, it is not right that this discrepancy between Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK is left unresolved. This is an issue of grave concern, and it has the potential to impact many people right across Northern Ireland. I wanted to bring this matter to the House to keep Members updated on my intentions. I am confident that we can make the desired progress on this issue, but getting it done quickly will depend on the support and consent of the Assembly and the Executive. I hope that I can count on that support in the coming weeks. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr O'Toole: As an Opposition, we have always said that we would be constructive and welcome progress where Executive Ministers make it, so I commend the statement and thank the Minister for bringing it to the House and for working collaboratively with his colleagues to act swiftly on the matter. It is very welcome. Is

the proposed legislation going to be designed in such a way that will allow the Victoria Square residents, many of whom are my constituents in South Belfast — you mentioned the High Court case — to reopen their case? Will the legislation be drawn in such a way that will allow them to take new action?

Mr Lyons: The proposed legislation came about due to the fact that there is a disparity between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Certainly, the High Court case highlighted that disparity. The Member will understand that it is inappropriate for me to comment on ongoing civil matters, but it is a positive that today we are dealing with that disparity that exists between different parts of the UK.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I welcome your statement, Minister, which recognises the need to better protect residents from defective design, workmanship and materials. Minister, you will know that, over the past number of weeks, the Communities Committee has received a number of pieces of correspondence from those who have been impacted, and you will understand that we, as a Committee, will want to work with you to ensure that we can do all that we can to provide the support and the redress that they need. Can you today provide any further detail on your understanding of the timeline that will apply to introducing the forthcoming legislative changes to establish a retrospective period of up to 30 years and a prospective period of up to 15 years in which a party can take action for defective premises? Also, Minister, what practical support are you able to offer in the meantime to those who have been impacted?

Mr Lyons: I will make a number of points. First, I do not have an exact timeline of how quickly legislation can be progressed. However, I hope that the Member will look at the steps that I have taken so far and will understand that I take the matter seriously and want the legislation to be progressed as quickly as possible so that the disparity no longer exists. I will do everything that I can to progress it as quickly as possible; however, some of it is out of my hands. I will require the consent and support of the Assembly, particularly on the accelerated passage process, and of the Executive. I received a letter from the Member in recent weeks on behalf of the Committee asking whether it is possible for me to fast-track any new legislation on defective buildings. I hope that that commitment from him and the Committee still stands, because that is an important hurdle that we can get over in order

to progress the legislation as quickly as possible.

My Department does not have a role or responsibility for people who are affected right now. My job is to try to deal with the disparity that exists in the legislation, and that is what I intend to do.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, can you give me some indication of what broad implications the changes will have for the building and construction sectors?

Mr Lyons: First and foremost, I hope that everyone will recognise that well-being through the safety of our citizens in Northern Ireland should be something that everybody wants to see and be part of. I understand what the Member is asking about the impact on the industry here, and it is important to say, as the Member will know from his constituency, that many of Northern Ireland's construction companies are already working in England and Wales under the increased responsibility and duties that have been placed upon them under the legislation. I believe that our local industry is incredibly resilient and has a history of adapting well to new challenges, and I have faith and confidence that it will be able to work to the standards that we hope to achieve through the legislation.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you, Minister. Credit where credit is due: when the Executive were asked to work together to come up with a solution, you did that, and I thank you for that. I am delighted that you have come to the House today to say that you will be taking forward legislation. That extension of the limitation period for defective residential buildings will introduce new provisions into the Limitation (Northern Ireland) Order, and, as you mentioned, it will be a Bill that will be primary legislation as opposed to any other type of regulation. Can you clarify how quickly you will be able to introduce it to the House, please?

Mr Lyons: Obviously, there are a number of different hurdles and barriers in the way to getting it through, but I believe that, very soon, I will be able to send it to the Executive to get Executive consent. I will then need to get the Bill drafted and through to the Executive again. I hope that I can count on the member's support at the Committee for the accelerated passage process. I cannot give a timeline, but, again, I hope that people recognise the action that I have taken on this to date and the need that is out there for the disparity to be resolved. I want

to do it as quickly as possible, and, if I have the support of the Members of the House and the members of the Executive, I believe that we can do that very quickly.

Mr Chambers: I certainly welcome the statement today. Does the Minister agree that it points up the advantage of having a devolved legislature in this place that can act quickly and decisively in the interests of the people who we represent? That is demonstrated by the statement and was also demonstrated by how the Finance Minister dealt with the rates issue. Can the Minister confirm that the proposed legislation will enable the affected residents to reopen the legal system that was involved earlier?

1.15 pm

Mr Lyons: The Member will not be surprised to hear that I agree with him on the importance of having a local Assembly and Executive in place. However, they are worth having only if they are prepared to do the things that need to be done in order to improve the lives of our citizens. I hope that the Member has seen my commitment to this matter from the start. I did not want there to be a fight over which Minister would be responsible. I took it on, we made sure that the work was done in the Department, and we worked with the Finance Minister and the AERA Minister. It shows how the Assembly can deliver and get things done. Obviously, I cannot comment on ongoing civil matters. My goal is to deal with the disparity in legislation, and that is what we will do.

Mr Dickson: Minister, thank you for your statement. It is a clear demonstration of Ministers cooperating in the Executive. Hopefully, we will see a satisfactory outcome to the circumstances around the issue.

Minister, you will be aware that the National House Building Council (NHBC) provides a 10-year warranty for properties. Will you intimate how much the legislation may affect that right, which is provided to owners of new properties?

Mr Lyons: I thank Mr Dickson for his comments. I know that there has been some interest in the NHBC warranty. Ultimately, it is for the NHBC to decide how the legislation would affect the warranty. Mr Dickson might want to contact the NHBC. I understand that it is an issue of concern, but we do not have direct control of or responsibility for it.

Ms Mulholland: I associate myself with my colleague's thanks, Minister, for how quickly

you have taken the issue on board. I note that you have been working closely with Executive Ministers, including the Minister of Finance. There will obviously be a resource requirement for your Department. Has a budget or any expenditure been discussed with the Minister of Finance?

Mr Lyons: I am grateful to the Member for raising that issue. It is important that the Assembly deliver on issues that matter and that people can see that Ministers have taken a collaborative approach to this in making sure not only that we get the transfer of functions order sorted out — hopefully, I will get support for the legislation — but that our Departments have been working well together in resourcing it. I am not concerned primarily with resourcing in terms of pounds; people resource is what I need. I am grateful to colleagues in other Departments, particularly the Department for the Economy, who have provided some of the human resource that we need. That is where the big challenge is at the moment. We understand that these are complex issues. We need people with the right skills, and not all of those lie in the Department for Communities. We have worked well together on that resource, and I hope that that will continue. That is one part of an overall issue of building safety that I hope to progress during this mandate. I will need to make sure that I continue to have that resource in place, and I hope that I will.

Mr Kingston: As a member of the Communities Committee, I welcome the Minister's statement, the fact that he has stepped forward to take responsibility for this matter, in conversation with other Ministers, and his plan to bring forward the necessary legislation. Does his Department have the necessary resource, which he just explained, to deliver on the matter in a timely manner and be part of the joint working across the Executive to deliver for the residents?

Mr Lyons: In the meantime, yes, we are getting the resource that we need. However, it is important to highlight that this is not over yet. We are starting the process and making good progress, but there is more to be done. I will continue to need the support of Executive colleagues to not just allow the legislation to progress but, importantly, make sure that I have access to the resource that I need. Perhaps that will be financial, but it is more likely to be human resource. I hope that I can continue to depend on the support of others in that regard. I think that there is a collective will to get this done, so I hope that the funding and the people will follow that.

Ms Ferguson: Like others here today, we very much welcome the steps that have been taken by our Minister to ensure that we close the legal loophole in relation to the residents. Minister, will you update the Assembly on the meetings that you have had, or the ongoing engagement that you have, with the affected residents?

Mr Lyons: I assume that the Member is referring specifically to the Victoria Square residents who were highlighted in the High Court case. I have not had any direct engagement with them. I am more than happy to meet the residents and explain what I intend to bring forward, but I cannot, and no one should expect me to, get involved directly in the ongoing process. It is a live civil matter, so it would be inappropriate for me to do so. However, as Minister, my door is always open; I am happy for anyone to raise with me any concerns that they have about any issue. I am happy for that to be on the agenda; I just need to make the very clear distinction between what we are trying to do here and the separate matter that is ongoing.

Mr Allister: The Minister rather avoided Mr O'Toole's question, so I will ask him a question that I think that he can and should answer: will the legislation contain express provision to enable actions that are struck out for limitation infringement to be re-litigated?

Mr Lyons: As I have said a number of times here this afternoon, I am not going to comment on or get involved in ongoing matters. As he will understand, it would be inappropriate for me to get involved in the specifics. However, I hope that, when the legislation is produced, it will become apparent to the Member what exactly it will do. I look forward to being able to publish that legislation.

Mr Carroll: This sounds positive, Minister, but we need to look at the detail, obviously. People have expressed to me the need for legislation before the recess for all sorts of reasons. Minister, I am disappointed that you have refused to urge people who are in different dwellings but similar circumstances to those in Victoria Square apartments to come forward. That would help you and your Department to get a holistic view of the problem and get robust legislation in place. In light of your announcement today, will you reconsider looking at that?

Mr Lyons: I do not think that I have refused to meet anybody at any stage. I am more than happy for anyone to send me an invite to talk about these issues. I think that the Member

previously asked me whether I would do a call-out for people to come. I am happy to meet anybody who wants to talk to me about this issue. However, this is a good day. This is a day on which a problem has been identified. We had the potential for a fight over who was responsible, but, instead, Ministers worked together to bring about a resolution to an issue that has the potential to impact people right across Northern Ireland. I want to make sure that we have legislation in place that deals with that disparity and the reason for it so that we can provide additional protection for people in Northern Ireland. That is something that everybody should welcome, and most have.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. Members should take their ease for a wee minute.

Executive Committee Business

Hospital Parking Charges Bill: First Stage

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I beg to introduce the Hospital Parking Charges Bill [NIA 02/22-27], which is a Bill to modify the operation of the Hospital Parking Charges Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 so as to postpone the ban on charging money for parking vehicles in hospital car parks.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

The draft Period Products (Department of Education Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024.

Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): I beg to move

That the draft Period Products (Department of Education Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit for the debate.

Mr Givan: I am pleased to bring the draft regulations to the Assembly for approval. The regulations will be made under powers conferred by the Period Products (Free Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

Before I turn to the regulations themselves, I will take a moment to reflect on the enormous benefits of the provision. Free period products, which can be accessed easily and in a dignified way, will be life-changing for girls and women across Northern Ireland, particularly at a time that household budgets are under so much pressure.

My Department has already been providing free period products in schools for almost three years under the period dignity pilot scheme. Feedback from pupils and teachers has been overwhelmingly positive, as was demonstrated by the responses to a survey when the pilot scheme was launched in September 2021. That initiative is not simply focused on period poverty but aims to respect the dignity of our learners

so that they can attend school confidently, take part fully in activities and focus on their education.

No female should be prevented from fully participating in education simply because she has periods. I am delighted to say that the pilot scheme has been successful in that regard. In fact, 82% of pupils availing themselves of the scheme said that it increased their confidence in managing their period in school. The pilot also provides education on periods, aiming to increase the knowledge of pupils and teachers, male and female, and to break down the stigma associated with periods. I am hopeful that that excellent educational support, developed by the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (NICCEA), will continue.

I will now speak to the draft regulations. Members will be aware that all Departments must specify in regulation the public service bodies that will have duties under the 2022 Act. I thank the Executive Office for establishing an interdepartmental working group to ensure that a coordinated approach is taken. The powers provided under the Act to make the regulations are very specific. Departments must specify which of their bodies will be legally required to make sure that free period products are available for use on their premises. As well as specifying public service bodies, the regulations may provide for descriptions of premises and persons and of when premises are to be treated as being in use.

Given the policy intent of the Act to make products widely available, my Department aims to minimise any limitations to the provision in making the regulations. My Department is required to specify bodies with functions that would enable them to discharge duties under the Act for persons in school premises. It proposes to specify the Education Authority (EA) as manager of controlled schools, boards of governors of all voluntary schools and grant-maintained integrated schools, and proprietors of independent schools.

My Department may also specify public service bodies other than schools, provided that the specified bodies are statutory bodies, serving the public for the public interest. My Department therefore proposes to specify the Education Authority for statutory youth settings, its education other than at school (EOTAS) settings and its administrative accommodation. Other arm's-length bodies (ALBs) that meet the definition of "public service body" under the Act are also included in the draft regulations. Those are the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools

(CCMS), the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, and the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI). Those bodies are all specified for their administrative accommodation.

There are several arm's-length bodies in the education sector that cannot be specified because they are not statutory. Those include the Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS), the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) and the Governing Bodies Association Northern Ireland (GBANI).

For these bodies, I understand that it is intended that they will, however, be captured under regulations being made by the Department for the Economy. This is because they are located in St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College.

1.30 pm

There are other bodies that could make provision on a voluntary basis even though they cannot be specified in regulations. These are the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) and the Middletown Centre for Autism.

As already stated, the Act allows my Department to provide descriptions of persons and premises in order to ensure that the Act can be made workable in the education sector. The proposed regulations contain such descriptions. First, there are descriptions of premises. In the case of schools, regulations will include "all buildings comprising school premises". This means that all buildings used for non-educational purposes — for example, eating, leisure or sport — as well as those used for learning will be captured so long as they form part of the premises of the school. This is important in ensuring reasonable ease of access to free products, which is required under the Act.

Education other than at school and statutory youth settings are captured where those settings are on Education Authority premises, whether leased or owned. However, community-based youth and EOTAS settings cannot be captured in the regulations as they are not statutory organisations. These gaps in provision may not have been intentional when the Act was being drafted. However, provision at such settings could be made on a voluntary basis.

Regulations will include administrative accommodation leased or owned by a specified public service body for the purpose of effecting its statutory functions. As I said earlier, CCMS, CCEA and the GTCNI are included in the proposed list of public service bodies in relation to their administrative accommodation.

I move onto the description of persons contained in the draft regulations. My Department proposes to limit provision in all settings to pupils, staff and visitors on school premises or in EA EOTAS settings; young people, staff and visitors in statutory youth settings; and staff and visitors in the administrative accommodation of specified public service bodies. In all cases, "visitor" is identified as:

"a person with legitimate reason for being in the premises".

This is to ensure that the general public is not entitled to go into these settings to obtain free period products. This is particularly important for safeguarding children and young people.

An eight-week public consultation was undertaken on these proposals. Bodies consulted included the Department of Education's arm's-length bodies, schools and my Department's wider stakeholder base. Some 47 responses were received, which provided useful clarification on points of detail but did not necessitate significant change to the policy proposals. The response to the consultation has been published on my Department's website.

I anticipate the cost of the provision of free period products to be in the region of £900,000 a year. I am hopeful that that funding will be made available to support the effective implementation of the legislation.

On approval of the draft regulations, my Department will conduct a short period of consultation with the specified public service bodies. This consultation will be in relation to guidance that is to be provided under the Act. Once that guidance is published, the specified public service bodies are required to consult with product users on the arrangements to be put in place for providing free period products. Both consultations are a requirement of the Act and must be properly carried out.

I thank the Committee for Education for its consideration of these draft regulations, and I hope that I have addressed some of the points that were raised at recent meetings. I am aware that the Committee would wish to ensure that

any, perhaps unintended, gaps in the legislative provision can be addressed in other ways, and my Department commits to working with other Departments and organisations to address those gaps as far as possible.

I commend the regulations to the House.

Mr Mathison (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): Speaking on behalf of the Education Committee, I am pleased to offer the Committee's support for the draft Period Products (Department of Education Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024.

Access to period products should be universal, as is the case for many other basic hygiene products. The previous Education Committee welcomed the passing of the Period Products Act, having worked on period product provision for some time, and the current Committee is glad to see the regulations enacted, allowing the Act to become a reality.

The previous Committee tabled amendments to the original Period Products Bill, which were accepted by the Assembly, to require privacy, confidentiality and the consideration of sustainable options in the arrangements for the provision of period products. It also recommended a co-educational awareness-raising approach to the roll-out of the scheme to reduce period stigma and present sustainable options.

Since the restoration of devolution, the Education Committee has heard from officials in the Department on the work that they have undertaken on the regulations. Under the Act, provision is to be sufficient to meet a person's needs while on the premises of a specified public service body, as has been set out by the Minister. A policy on the way forward for take-home provision for pupils, which is currently provided through the schools' pilot scheme, will need to be agreed in the context of the universal scheme — again, as referenced by the Minister — that will be delivered by TEO. We look forward to hearing more about how that will be implemented and brought forward. I will not go into detail on the specified bodies, as the Minister covered those in detail.

Department of Education officials were able to provide the Committee with clarity on the costings of the provision. The Committee was particularly concerned about the interface between statutory and non-statutory provision and, going forward, the sustainability of funding for those measures. The Department suggested that the cost of the provision could be in the

region of £0.8 million per annum. Funding will need to be bid for, and expenditure will be subject to business case approval. The Committee is keen to hear what assurance the Minister can give that funding for that raft of measures will, indeed, be protected.

I pay tribute to the Department. It has led the way with its period dignity pilot scheme. We know that that resource has been broadly welcomed by those who use it. The provision of free period products, particularly in schools, has gone some way to helping break down the taboo and stigma that can, sometimes, be associated with periods, while also providing those in need with access to products in a dignified manner.

Period products legislation intends to improve access to education, work and sport, alongside improving dignity for women, girls and those who menstruate. The provision of period products is a gender-equality issue, and we should all champion any sort of provision that focuses on equal educational opportunity for all. It also highlights the importance of improving the understanding of menstruation and creating supportive, empowering conversations about periods. Taking all that into account, the Committee has agreed to recommend that the draft period products regulations be affirmed and made by the Assembly.

As Alliance education spokesperson, I wish to add that we are happy to support the regulations for all the reasons discussed by the Committee.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister and his Department for their work on this important legislation. I welcome the survey results, which were recently given to the Education Committee, that showed that young women and girls feel far more confident in school as a direct result of having access to period products. That is what we want to see: higher attendance of young girls at school and their increased appetite for partaking in sports, inside and outside school.

I thank period poverty activists like Katrina McDonnell at Menstruation Matters, Period Poverty NI and many more for their commitment to tackling period poverty in all our communities across the North. It is important that we as MLAs, in recognising the need, provide those products in our offices, given the financial pressures that so many families and individuals are under.

Lastly and briefly, I thank Pat Catney, former SDLP MLA, for bringing forward this important

legislation. I shared an office with Pat and am terribly fond of him. He is a grandfather who realised the impact of the lack of equality, the detriment caused as a direct result of a lack of access to those products and what that did to young women and girls. I thank Pat for his input. We are extremely proud of him and his achievement. I really hope that the legislation continues to create positive outcomes for women and girls across the North.

Mrs Mason: Nobody should have to suffer the indignity of using unsuitable materials to mask their period or have to choose between putting food on the table and buying period products for themselves or their children. Period products are essential; they are not luxury items. For many people and families who are struggling with the rising cost of living, it can be a financial burden and a huge worry. No girl should ever miss school or school activities because she cannot access such products. Free access to sanitary products should be the norm in schools, universities, colleges, workplaces, football grounds, concert venues and many more places. Sinn Féin will continue to campaign for that in the Assembly and our local councils.

At a recent meeting of the Education Committee, as has been said, concerns were raised as to why non-statutory bodies, such as the Council for Integrated Education, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and the Middletown Centre for Autism cannot be specified in the regulations. I welcome the regulations, and, as they progress, we expect the Department to work constructively with those bodies and support them so that they are able to provide period products in their settings.

Ms Brownlee: I welcome the regulations and commend the Minister and all those who played a part in getting them to this stage. The regulations are important and represent another significant step in the right direction to ensure that no female is ever disadvantaged due to period poverty. It is heartening to see a number of government, sectoral and voluntary organisations running pilots and schemes to provide free period products in our public spaces. The success and demand for those schemes show that a clear need still exists in Northern Ireland for free period products.

Period products are not optional. They are a basic necessity for women and girls, and it is important that they are accessible to all. It is pleasing to see that that is no longer a taboo subject and that many individuals and organisations continue to speak up and stand up to ensure that women and girls can access

the products that they need when they need them.

I absolutely support the regulations, and I thank all those who have worked so hard to bring them to the House.

Mr Givan: I thank everyone for participating in the debate on the regulations. I thank the Chair of the Committee for Education for the work of the Committee and his kind remarks in commending the Department for taking a lead in the area. The other Members who commented quite rightly highlighted the importance of making sure that free period products are accessible. That is a necessity, and we need to make sure that they are provided in a dignified manner for those who need them because there should be no barriers for girls when it comes to being in school or other educational settings. That also helps to break down taboos on the subject.

I share the sentiment of what Ms Hunter said about Pat Catney. He was an Assembly colleague of mine, and he sponsored a private Member's Bill on this matter and spoke passionately about it. Once again, I acknowledge the work that he did when he was a Member for Lagan Valley. I commend the regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Period Products (Department of Education Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Private Members' Business

Child Poverty

Mr O'Toole: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses profound regret at the findings of the recent NI Audit Office report on child poverty, including the shocking finding that one in five children in Northern Ireland is living in relative poverty and nearly 10% of households are unable to afford basic goods; calls on the Minister for Communities to lay before the Assembly, no later than September 2024, a comprehensive child poverty strategy that includes specific and measurable targets to reduce child poverty by the end of this mandate; and further calls on the Minister to work with the Minister of Finance to agree an ambitious ring-fenced budget to deliver on the aforementioned child poverty reduction targets by the end of this mandate.

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. As an amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List, the Business Committee has agreed that 15 minutes will be added to the total time for debate. Please open the debate on the motion.

1.45 pm

Mr O'Toole: Today's motion should be seen in conjunction with our motions for tomorrow. The SDLP has tabled a series of motions for today and tomorrow that are designed to get to the root of the scandal of the poverty that afflicts our society. We believe that, 25 years after the Good Friday Agreement, we have a moral obligation to finally tackle the stubbornly high levels of deprivation and poverty that exist in Northern Ireland and that are among the highest in these islands, blighting lives, ruining aspiration and, ultimately, putting longer-term pressure on other services. Over the past number of years, sharply increased inflation has combined with a decade and a half of immoral Tory austerity to create real need and suffering not just among the most destitute but in working households. One in five children is living in relative poverty; nearly one in 10 households is struggling to afford basic goods; nearly 300 people in Northern Ireland are dying in cold homes; and we are in the midst of a housing crisis.

This place — the Assembly — is not powerless to help. The SDLP Opposition is proposing a series of practical steps that we hope that the Executive parties will sign up to and that can be implemented through the rest of the mandate. We have, in the past, through welfare mitigations, proven that the devolved Assembly is able to take steps in order to alleviate poverty and mitigate the very worst of austerity. All that we are asking is that we do more of that and, indeed, go further.

Our motion on child poverty should also be seen as intimately linked to tomorrow's first motion in Opposition day business. That motion is on the removal of the pernicious and unjustifiable two-child limit in universal credit, which the UK Government introduced nearly a decade ago. We believe, as do most expert advisers, academics and campaign groups, that that removal will be the fastest and most effective way of getting rid of child poverty. We will also bring forward motions on eradicating fuel poverty and ending no-fault evictions in housing. Today's motion on child poverty is the start of that work.

What does our motion say? First, it expresses "profound regret" at the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report, which was published a number of weeks ago, that is full of "shocking" findings on the stubbornly high levels of child poverty in our society. That report was an indictment, in a sense, of all of us. It shows that not only have we failed to properly address child poverty but, in many ways, we have allowed the problem to grow worse. As I said, one in five children in the North is living in relative poverty, and nearly one in 10 is in absolute poverty.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. I remember that what was called the Committee for the Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister, way back some 15 years ago, reported on child poverty. It might be useful to explain the difference between relative and absolute poverty in children.

Mr O'Toole: Clearly, they are different statistical measures. One relates to the level of average household income. There is a difference. I am not going to spend all my remaining minutes explaining that, although I am sure I would like to get into a policy-wonkish debate about it, but there is a difference. People who are in absolute poverty are in a more desperate situation than people who are living in relative poverty. However, that does not mean that we should not have rigorous and robust policy interventions to address relative poverty. All the indications are that those who

are living in relative poverty are more likely to fall into absolute poverty and, indeed, are more likely to avail themselves of other services and cost the taxpayer more down the line. The Audit Office report that I referred to also highlights how economically challenging child poverty is for Northern Ireland in the long term. It is not only an immediate moral challenge but it creates longer-term costs for other public services. We know that it imposes greater costs on the education service, the health service and sometimes, tragically, further down the line, the criminal justice system and social services. We do not believe that we can be relaxed about that situation or leave it to sit as it is, so our motion calls for a binding target to reduce child poverty by the end of the mandate, and we ask the Minister for Communities to come forward with a plan for how he proposes to deliver that reduction.

I acknowledge that that plan will need to be cross-cutting and cross-departmental. Although it is the Minister for Communities who will respond to today's debate, it is important to acknowledge that the issue is, fundamentally and inescapably, entirely cross-cutting and cross-departmental. I do not want the debate to be about me or others simply saying that the Minister for Communities is, by himself, responsible for alleviating child poverty, although his Department is, clearly, primarily responsible for the welfare interventions that we are calling for. Our position is that we need what we and campaign groups have been calling for for a number of years: an updated, public child poverty strategy to deal with the real challenges that we face.

At the heart of that plan should be binding targets — publicly available and reportable, so that the public can see how well the Executive are doing on delivery — for the reduction of child poverty by the end of the mandate. We are asking not for poverty to be entirely eradicated by the end of the mandate — that would not be a reasonable or constructive suggestion — but for a measurable reduction. We propose that there should be specific interventions, the one that we think to be most important being the subject of tomorrow's motion, the removal of the two-child limit. We think that that is a practical suggestion. We acknowledge that there is a cost, but we think that it is affordable, and we have suggested ways in which we think that it could be paid for. Specifically in relation to today's motion, our view is that there should be a binding target for child poverty reduction in this mandate. We also think that the Minister of Finance should work with the Minister for Communities and other colleagues to agree a ring-fenced budget to

deliver on those targets. That is reasonable and constructive, and it is urgent.

We acknowledge that there are elements of the amendment in the name of Alliance Party Members that we agree with. In part of the amendment is the sense that a child poverty strategy needs to be part of a broader anti-poverty strategy. I do not disagree with that, and nothing in our motion contradicts or undermines that. However, we challenge the amendment — I say this in a constructive and mature way — in that it appears to remove two things, the first of which is the commitment that the Communities Minister report to the Assembly by September this year. We do not think that that is an unreasonable timeline. We think that, as an Opposition, part of our job is to ask not just for aspirations but for targets, timelines and dates, so we do not support the removal of that date. Secondly, the amendment removes the requirement of a specific, ring-fenced budget for child poverty alleviation. It is important, given our experience of what happens to budgets in some other areas when ring fences are removed, that there be a specific, ring-fenced budget. A large part of that ring-fenced budget will go on what I discussed earlier: the removal via mitigation of the disastrous two-child cap on universal credit. We will wait to hear the arguments for the amendment, but we are relatively sceptical of it, not because we think that it has been cynically tabled or that it attempts to negate our motion; rather, it removes some of the force of our motion, particularly on timelines and specificity of budgets.

In the course of the next day, we will have lots of opportunities to debate poverty. We think that, 25 years on from the Good Friday Agreement, it is unacceptable that our poverty levels, especially our child poverty levels, remain as stubbornly high as they are. We think that we can do better. We acknowledge that all parties in the Chamber are broadly committed to the work of alleviating poverty, but we say that now is the time for the new Executive to put their mind to properly dealing with the issues and to implementing the recommendations not only of campaign groups but of some of the report of the independent panel on welfare mitigations to the previous Communities Minister. Indeed, the panel was at work when you had your spell as Communities Minister, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. It is time to get on with it and deliver for the most vulnerable in our society and for working families.

In proposing today's motion, and the other motions tomorrow, we commend the motions to the Assembly, and we ask that we all get

serious and show a commitment to alleviating poverty.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Matthew.

Question Time starts at 2.00 pm. Sian, you will be the first Member to speak after that, and you will have 10 minutes to move the amendment. The debate will resume at 3.30 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Speaker: Questions 1, 4 and 11 have been withdrawn.

Communities in Transition: Update

2. **Ms Egan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Communities in Transition (CIT) project. (AQO 250/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First Minister): Through Communities in Transition, we are determined to build a safer society, free from the negative influences of paramilitarism, criminality and coercive control. The tackling paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime (TPCOC) programme has been extended into 2024-25, following a commitment from the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. The programme will invest £2.3 million in CIT for 2024-25, subject to the agreement of the Executive's Budget for this year. CIT has delivered 82 projects, totalling £19 million, across the eight CIT areas. Some 51 projects have been completed, and the remaining 31 contracts are continuing into 2024-25, with a renewed focus on the main issues impacting on communities from paramilitarism, criminality and coercive control. If we are to bring about lasting change and release all communities from the grip of paramilitary control, we need to continue to adopt a holistic approach to tackling systemic issues and work in partnership with our local communities.

Ms Egan: Thank you very much, deputy First Minister. I have seen the great work of projects funded by CIT in my constituency. Will more flexibility be shown in the areas targeted for the next tranche of funding?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: It is always difficult, because a boundary is drawn around certain areas that either qualify or do not qualify, and sometimes it can, of course, be as simple as a house to a house or a street to a street. We therefore try to show flexibility in many of the Executive Office programmes. For Urban Villages, for example, we were able to adopt that flexible approach. I agree with the Member that there should be flexibility in the CIT project

as it moves forward. We are undertaking the evaluation of phase 2, and that evaluation will inform phase 3. The matter raised by the Member has certainly come up, and I have heard her on that issue.

Mr Kingston: How successful has the CIT project been to date? What has been delivered through it?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: There have been 156 social action projects delivered already. Those projects account for 9,000 participants. The Member will be aware that the projects are not to replace but to supplement and complement PSNI activities to tackle criminality. They are therefore projects that work very much with the community on building community resilience and community capacity and on encouraging young people in those communities to pursue positive and progressive pathways, particularly through training, education and sport, into employment. It is vital that those communities have that bright future and that they feel the dividend from a peaceful and stable Northern Ireland. That is what the projects have been focused on.

Mr Chambers: Will the Minister confirm whether she has had discussions with the Justice Minister about moving away from the use of the term "paramilitaries" and to focus instead on calling them what they are, which is drug dealers, child abusers and organised crime gangs?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: There is undoubtedly a significant amount of criminality from some individuals and organisations, but there are uniquely Northern Ireland aspects involved, because some of the organisations have their roots and origins in our past and in the Troubles. Of course, that brings a particular dimension to the situation. That is why the programme takes that into account. As I indicated, a light touch is certainly not being applied to criminality. The programme is in place to work alongside the PSNI and support it in tackling criminality and to have a zero-tolerance approach to criminality, drug dealing and other abuses in communities: those abuses that bring our communities down. It is important to note that, in those communities, there are many fantastic examples of community work, organisations, young people, families and community activity, so areas should not be simply viewed through the prism of the criminality and other aspects that have plagued them for some considerable time.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mark Durkan, I ask the deputy First Minister to point the microphone towards herself. Hansard staff are struggling to hear her.

Mr Durkan: I have also seen at first hand some extremely successful CIT projects in the Creggan area of my constituency — I commend all involved in them — but there are other projects, the effectiveness of which is perhaps not as obvious. That has sometimes led to frustration in the community. There are questions —

Mr Speaker: Do you have a question, Mark?

Mr Durkan: — that the deputy First Minister may be able to answer about how projects are selected for funding and about how new projects can come forward under the process.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: As I said in my initial answer, in this phase of CIT, we will have £2.3 million to invest this year. That is building on the work of the previous two years. We are now moving towards phase 3 of CIT. A consultation has been under way for some time, looking at which projects have been most effective and why some of the projects that have been supported have, perhaps, not been as effective as it was hoped that they would be. That is all set within the matrix of the key principles of CIT. As I indicated, those are about building community resilience, working with communities and young people, and the transitioning of young people, through sport, training and other initiatives, towards positive futures. Many of those projects are based on best practice, but, as we know, that does not guarantee that they will work. That is why that consultation and evaluation is important to inform the way forward into CIT phase 3, which must take into account some of the issues that the Member has raised.

Mr Allister: Does transitioning not have to start closer to home in the Executive Office? Is there any sign of the Minister's partner in the Government's transitioning towards being able to condemn IRA murders? We have just had another example of the failure to condemn after the focus on the horrendous Kingsmills massacre. Surely that is a baby step, but a necessary step, for anyone in the Government?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: It is welcome that we have had the opportunity today to mark the appalling atrocity that happened at Kingsmills. We know that it has been a long and difficult journey for the families. The coroner confirmed that it was a deeply sectarian attack. Certainly, personally

speaking, I have absolutely no issue with standing here and saying very clearly that all terrorism is wrong. There was always an alternative. I certainly urge all members of the Executive to do the same.

Mrs Dillon: Can you provide an overview of the successes and key deliverables of the CIT programme, please?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: There were a number of key themes in the programme, including community development, health and well-being, environment and culture, community safety and policing, personal transition, addressing the needs of young people and expansion of restorative practices. I am pleased to say that, following that in-depth consultation and evaluation of this over the past number of weeks and months, there has been positive feedback on the outcomes of working with communities.

Obviously, we will go into more detail on the types of projects that seem to have worked very well, but, importantly, what we need to do is learn from that and ensure that we are pulling forward that best practice, not just into the third phase of CIT but into a number of other programmes that we are working on in communities to build that community resilience, because, of course, what works here to build that resilience and social capital in those communities will work with a range of other projects that the Executive are focusing on.

North/South Implementation Bodies

3. **Ms Armstrong** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline when nominations for appointment will be sought for members to the boards of the North/South implementation bodies. (AQO 251/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: We are considering a process of identifying Executive nominees to the boards of the North/South implementation bodies. We intend for the Executive nominees to vacancies on the boards of North/South bodies to be progressed in the forthcoming weeks and months, and for appointments to be made at the sectoral meetings.

Ms Armstrong: Can you confirm how the Executive Office intends to improve the work of the North/South bodies so that it aligns with the future Programme for Government, investment strategy and budgets that are approved by the Assembly?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), sectoral bodies and associated work are all rooted in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement as amended by the St Andrews Agreement. That means that they are focused on the stranded approach. That is right and proper. It sets the parameters for that work. That work recognises that the internal affairs and matters of Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom are a matter for the Northern Ireland and United Kingdom Government. Of course, for work that does align with the Programme for Government within the context of that stranded approach, the appropriate areas of work will be aligned as far as possible.

Mr O'Toole: You mentioned the stranded approach and the fact that the NSMC's work is set out in parameters in the Good Friday Agreement. None of that is true of the East-West Council. There is no obligation, when the East-West Council meets, for Ministers to bring back any report on what was discussed or for there to be Ministers from multiple parties. Given that your party brought down the institutions in order to, as you said at the time, rebalance east-west with North/South, I presume that you would support the East-West Council coming under the same rules and constraints as the North/South Ministerial Council?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I absolutely support full transparency in the work of the East-West Council. It is a body that was, perhaps, missed at the time of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Under those arrangements, we had Ireland and United Kingdom bodies and the North/South bodies, but we did not have a body dedicated to focusing on internal UK relationships and arrangements. With this new body, there is huge potential for engagement with not just the UK Government but the north of England, Manchester, Scotland and Wales, with whom we have a huge amount of commonality in many of the challenges and opportunities that we face. I fully support full transparency and all the procedures around that to ensure that Members are fully informed about the exciting work that this body will take forward.

Ms Sheerin: We are all best served when all the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are operating in full, and that means the North/South bodies as well as the east-west bodies. As such, I welcome last week's meeting of the NSMC. Will the deputy First Minister outline some of the topics that were discussed at last Monday's NSMC plenary meeting?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: As I indicated, it was an initial meeting. Sectoral work on many of the issues that were discussed went on throughout that period. All the sectoral bodies were quorate and able to continue with some of their work. The issues that were discussed were those that, rightly, fall within the areas of responsibility of the North/South Ministerial Council. Those include the Ulster canal and the continued funding of the A5 project. A number of important issues and collaborative projects have been in the pipeline for some considerable time. I know that it has been the cause of frustration for many people, including in the Chamber, that those projects have not progressed. It is important that we continue to collaborate on those matters. As I said at the meeting, it is important that we are good neighbours to the Irish Government. Where it is logical and sits within the appropriate parameters of the institutions, we should, of course, have that positive engagement.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Meenan Square: Redevelopment

5. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on when work will commence on the redevelopment of Meenan Square. (AQO 253/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The redevelopment of Meenan Square is a transformative capital project of approximately £1.2 million in the Bogside/Fountain Urban Villages area. The aim of the scheme is to improve good relations outcomes and develop a thriving place where there has been a history of deprivation and community tension. The project, which is being delivered by the Executive Office's Urban Villages initiative in conjunction with Apex Housing Association and Meenan Square Developments Ltd, will see the construction of a mixed-use development comprising housing, a community hub and essential local amenities. The project will be subject to a formal planning application in summer 2024. Work is anticipated to commence on site by late 2025, subject to planning approval.

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. This project is a really long-running saga, and the length of time that it is taking to progress it is deeply frustrating. Residents in the Bogside area are losing patience, as it is a complete and utter eyesore. How confident is the deputy First Minister that the people of Derry will see this redevelopment take place at pace? What is the completion date?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: As the Member will be aware, the first phase of Urban Villages is now coming to an end, including a number of the revenue resource projects. There have been challenges in relation to some of the capital proposals, and this is one of those. Some of those challenges, as we know, can be unexpected. There can be significant barriers to progressing projects in the timescales that were originally set out, and that was certainly the case here. I welcome the fact that we were able to purchase the site in accordance with the Land and Property Services valuation. That purchase will enable work to progress at pace. The First Minister and I are very focused on the issue. We will be asking for regular updates to ensure that the project happens as quickly as possible, particularly as we are moving towards phase 2 of Urban Villages.

Ms Ferguson: Will the deputy First Minister set out the plans and timeline for the community consultation on the Meenan Square project?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The project will be subject to a community consultation in spring 2024. There will be a 12-week statutory standstill period on the designs to allow for community feedback. That is quite a lengthy period, but we want to ensure that the local community has maximum buy-in and that it has an opportunity to look at the proposals and is content with them. Importantly, if those proposals are not going to work for the local community, we will take them away, genuinely listen to the issues that have been raised and amend them before substantive work commences. We are aware that a 12-week consultation period will delay the commencement of work on the site, but it is important because Urban Villages has, at its very heart, the key principle that the projects are co-designed and co-produced with the local community and local stakeholders. Therefore, we want to maximise buy-in to the project.

2.15 pm

Mr Middleton: I thank the deputy First Minister for the work that she has done over the years on the development of the Urban Villages initiative. The Fountain is one area that has benefited from Urban Villages. Will the deputy First Minister outline how the Fountain area has benefited and what plans there are for the Urban Villages programme?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Really pleasing progress has been made on the Derry/Londonderry Urban Villages area. It was one of the very first areas that I visited back when I was junior Minister when we were creating the scheme. It

was very clear when we visited all the areas impacted that there was a significant degree of dereliction and of support required. One of the key things that was said to me, particularly in the Cathedral Youth Club, which I visited, was that there were lots of ideas about how to improve the area. The local community knew the solutions to some of the challenges that it faced, but it was often very difficult to find the appropriate scheme because the criteria were quite exclusionary.

There are some really good examples, including the Fountain play park and the work that is being done to the Cathedral Youth Club. There is also the very exciting New Gate Arts and Culture Centre, which everybody in the city will be aware of. That is a very significant new build with a very exciting programme coming up. There has been lots of very positive work, and we will learn from that as we move into phase 2 of Urban Villages.

Applicability Motions

6. **Mr Brown** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what procedures they have in place to table applicability motions for new EU acts in line with the timescales set out in paragraph 19 of schedule 6B to the Northern Ireland Act. (AQO 254/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: When notifications are received that propose the addition of a new EU act to the Windsor framework, there is a two-week period in which the First Minister and I, acting jointly, may decide to table an applicability motion. After that two-week period, an applicability motion may only be tabled by any other Member of the Assembly, and a vote will be held before the end of a five-week period following the notifications being made. A decision to jointly table an applicability motion for newly published EU acts will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Mr Brown: Thank you, deputy First Minister. Given that the Executive Office has tabled an applicability motion regarding a new EU act on organic pet food, can the deputy First Minister confirm that her Department will take a similar approach to any and all future EU acts that fall within the remit of an applicability motion?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: As the Member will be aware, the processes set out that there will be consideration of that. The scrutiny Committee will also be helpful in looking at whether an amendment or a proposed new regulation will create any barriers. The new mechanism, previously described as the Stormont brake,

has two distinct elements, depending on whether the EU act is an amendment or a proposed new regulation. The purpose of that mechanism is to allow the House to have scrutiny, either through the Committees, through the ministerial roles or through debate in this Chamber. Of course, a duty falls on the First Minister and I to consider whether to move that forward, and, in that consideration, we will look at all the aspects, particularly in relation to whether a new regulatory barrier would be created North/South or east-west. In this case, we believe that applying the regulation would avoid any new regulatory barriers in the United Kingdom and North/South, which is why we have made the decision to jointly table that motion.

Mr McGuigan: In her response, the deputy First Minister touched on applicability motions, which are one aspect of scrutiny. What role does she see for the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee in that and other aspects of EU legislative changes here in the North?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: It has a very important role. This is only the second proposal that we have had that will be subject to the applicability motion mechanism. I know that the Committee, with new members, is only getting a sense of how it will want to work and when it will want to inform. We have raised some concerns that this regulation came in over the Easter weekend during recess. It is important that we maximise the time that we have to look at whether the First Minister and I should table an applicability motion, or, if we do not, to inform other Members who may want to do so. We need to be careful with the timescales and to be fully informed, but the work will be essential, because many of the issues will be technical and we will need to know quickly whether the proposals will create new regulatory barriers.

Ms Forsythe: Will the deputy First Minister outline the rationale for signing applicability motions?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: As indicated, applicability motions are a new mechanism to ensure that there is appropriate democratic scrutiny and the option and opportunity to take a look at the impact of the new measures. With the prior protocol arrangements, there was not that opportunity. That created a significant democratic deficit for the House and for Northern Ireland. There is now an opportunity to do that scrutiny. We are informed, through the notification from you, Mr Speaker, of whether proposals would have the risk of creating a

regulatory barrier. In this case, the rest of the United Kingdom has already lowered the requirement to 95% organic ingredients for pet food to be labelled organic. The regulation proposes that the rest of the European Union does likewise. If we do not table the applicability motion and indicate that we want the measure to be applied, and, if it is not applied, it will leave Northern Ireland as the only place in the United Kingdom where pet food will require 100% organic content before it can be labelled organic. It is a technical proposal, but it is one that ensures that we do not create regulatory barriers in the United Kingdom or North/South.

Minority Communities: Support

7. **Mrs Dodds** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their Department's plans to support isolated minority communities living along the border. (AQO 255/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Cameron to answer the question.

Mrs Cameron (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): The Executive Office is committed to supporting isolated minority communities throughout the region and along the border. The Department aims to improve social, environmental and economic well-being by creating a place where people thrive through strategic policies, programmes and services. The Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) strategy reflects the Executive's commitment to improve community relations and continue the journey towards a more united and shared society. The strategy is delivered through the T:BUC-funded programmes, which the Executive Office and other Departments manage. They include initiatives such as T:BUC camps, Urban Villages, the planned interventions programme and the councils' good relations programme.

The Executive Office supports the good relations elements of the new PEACE PLUS programme, which represents €145 million in investment across the programme area. PEACE PLUS will soon see the roll-out of the co-designed local authority PEACE PLUS action plans and the regional building positive relations programme, which will promote positive relations that are characterised by respect; celebrate cultural diversity; and encourage people to live, learn and socialise together. The PEACE PLUS programme places particular emphasis on providing support to those who are most marginalised.

Through the draft refugee integration strategy, the Executive Office collaborates with Departments, councils, key stakeholders and those with lived experience. We recognise that integration is a two-way process and acknowledge the ways in which communities benefit from the experience, skills and diversity of those who are arriving. The Executive Office also provides support to victims and survivors through the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS). Those programmes provide a variety of supports, including health and well-being support, social support, advocacy and welfare support.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Minister for her response. In fact, her response was fairly general. I specifically wanted to know about communities that were marginalised and communities, like the Kingmills families, that felt the brunt of the IRA genocide that was experienced along the border.

Mr Speaker: Question, please.

Mrs Dodds: Does the Minister agree that there are other communities who do not live along the border but who feel just as marginalised? I think of communities in south Lurgan —

Mr Speaker: Question please, Mrs Dodds.

Mrs Dodds: — such as Mourneview, and, in particular, Brownlow House. How can the Executive Office support those communities?

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for her question. To give an update on the Upper Bann area, north Lurgan and Drumgask are Communities In Transition core areas. During 2023-24, CIT provided support to those communities through two programmes: health and well-being; and community safety and policing. Funding totalling £114,500 was provided to Communities in Transition in Lurgan during that delivery year. This year, a wide range of projects was delivered, including a group for young men in north Lurgan who are at risk of substance misuse and are known to cause antisocial behaviour, and the Mind Your Mate and Yourself programme, which involves multiple agencies coming together with groups of young people to educate them on how to communicate with emergency services.

I could give the Member other examples of interventions that have happened. Following consultations in 2022, Mourneview in the south Lurgan area was brought into CIT's remit as an area of influence, and work began on delivering interventions to local residents who were

deemed to be at risk of paramilitary influence, including a physical activity programme and training in first aid and child protection. In 2023-24, a further £10,000 was invested in Mourneview on a restorative approach programme, which included community safety workshops, youth engagement and the promotion of community pride and inclusion. A nine-month extension period for April to December 2024 has been agreed with CIT delivery partners, which will see £109,000 being invested in further delivery. We want to ensure that we are working across all areas. If the Member has any more specific queries, perhaps she would not mind writing to the Executive Office so that the matter can be explored further.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for her response, particularly the part about social, environmental and economic well-being. Does the Minister agree that, in many areas, there is increased rural isolation, which has been brought about by a denuding of services in some areas, such as health, domiciliary care and the like? We already have a problem with the absence of public transport in some areas. Does she agree that that could be exacerbated by the absence of EV infrastructure —

Mr Speaker: I think that we have the question, Mr McGlone.

Mr McGlone: — and the cost of EV?

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for the question. If he does not mind, I will come back to him in writing on that.

International Bureaux: Update

8. **Ms Kimmins** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of their international bureaux. (AQO 256/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The role of our offices in Washington DC, Brussels and Beijing is to represent and promote the Executive's interests and priorities overseas. That is key to our ambition as a small, outward-looking economy to build a more prosperous region in which our businesses and citizens can realise their potential. The bureaux work closely with key partners, including Invest NI, Tourism Ireland, local government and business communities, to promote Northern Ireland as a great place to work, live, invest in and visit. We have come to enjoy unprecedented access to key decision makers at the most senior levels right at the heart of the world's largest economies. That

was very much demonstrated by the engagements that the First Minister and I had over St Patrick's week in Washington DC, as well as those of junior Minister Reilly and junior Minister Cameron in Brussels.

Although that is welcome, it is the result of hard work over many years to build those relations and our reputation, and we cannot take it for granted. If we are to realise our ambitions, we need to continue to engage and build on the access and goodwill that we enjoy. As we look forward, we need to have a clear focus on our priorities for overseas offices and on new opportunities and regions.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline a timeline for a refreshed international strategy?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: As the Member will be aware, the international relations strategy was released by the then OFMDFM in 2014. Proposals were made to refresh it in 2016 and 2017, but there has been significant change in the world since 2014, not least in the geopolitical dynamics and emerging economies that might be a good fit for us in relation to enhancing engagement and looking for opportunities collaboratively. We are very conscious that we need to significantly review and refresh our international relations strategy. We are working on that with officials, and we hope to set out the timeline for that in the next number of weeks.

Mr Speaker: We now move to topical questions.

Integrated Schools: Funding Cuts

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister, when she visited a shared education campus in Limavady on 21 February with the First Minister and the Education Minister, knew that funding for integrated schools had been cut, and, if so, to state why the decision had not been made public at that stage and outline whether she agrees with the Executive's decision to cut that funding, in light of the fact that the Education Minister told him that he was told by the Finance Minister on 15 February that integrated schools' funding was to be cut, albeit the 10 integrated schools were not told until 22 February. (AQT 161/22-27)

2.30 pm

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Member will be aware that the financial situation of the Budget in Northern Ireland had been an issue of significant concern for some time, including when this place was not sitting. There was a high level of discussion, negotiation and communication with the UK Government to try to secure a better financial arrangement for Northern Ireland. Indeed, personally speaking, I can say clearly that it was my party that pushed hard for those discussions to commence immediately and prior to the restoration of these institutions, acknowledging that the Budget, as it was allocated at that point, would have been woefully insufficient. In fact, it would not have allowed us to do even public pay settlements etc.

Therefore, I welcome the fact that an additional £3.4 billion was secured from the UK Government. What was disappointing about that, though — we have said this very clearly — is that aspects of that were repackaged. What the Member is referring to is a repackaging of funding that had originally been allocated to a particular purpose. Of course, that has been difficult to deal with. The Budget is very tight. We are in a period of fiscal constraint, and hard decisions will have to be made. I cannot speak for the Education Minister, but I can only assume that it was communicated to him and that he, rightly and prudently, will have taken time to look into that issue, have those discussions with his officials and take advice on that matter. It is a matter for him to explain the timelines involved in that, but I can only imagine that that may well have been what has happened.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, to be clear, that money was not reprofiled by the UK Government. They took a ring fence off it, and the Executive made a decision to implement a cut in funding for integrated schools. On a related issue, last week, my colleague Colin McGrath asked the First Minister when we would see a Programme for Government. She said, "Hopefully by the summer, but let us not be in a hurry." Are you in a hurry to deliver a Programme for Government? When will it be delivered, and can you confirm that the now more than a dozen commitments made by Executive parties in private Members' motions will be formally implemented via a Programme for Government?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. We are keen to get a Programme for Government as soon as possible, but it must be the right Programme for Government. It must include the key priorities of the Executive, it must be realistic, and we are working with the

Finance Minister on the Budget implications around that.

A Programme for Government works best when it is strategic and has a small number of key actions for the Executive. That is not to take away from the significant amount of work that will occur within every Department, and Ministers should bring forward all the elements of that work to the Executive in the normal way. What we are focusing on is a high-level, strategic Programme for Government. It is possible to get that done by the summer but what the First Minister was indicating, I believe, was that by listening to the consultation feedback and to the Committees, we will be ensuring first and foremost that it is right, rather than just going towards a deadline, but, of course, the aim is to get it completed and in place by the summer.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Mother-and-baby Homes: Truth Recovery Process

T3. **Mr Tennyson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to set out the next steps in the truth recovery process for mother-and-baby homes and to state when appropriate redress and recognition will be available. (AQT 163/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: There were a number of key recommendations in the report on mother-and-baby homes. Those have been actioned, and work is under way. The key next step will be the legislation. There is a draft of that legislation. A number of policy issues are outstanding. We have been urging for work be completed on that and for a consultation to commence as soon as possible. We are conscious that many of those most affected, particularly the mothers, are of a certain age. We want them to be able to get that redress and support as quickly as possible, rather than to wait in the longer term.

There are a number of other recommendations. I can assure you that work is progressing on all those recommendations, but there is a key focus at this time on getting that legislation out to consultation as quickly as possible.

Mr Tennyson: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. A key issue highlighted in the report prepared for the interdepartmental working group was about the deterioration of the records of religious and voluntary organisations. What steps is the Minister's Department taking to ensure that those records

are protected, and will we see that reflected in the draft legislation?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: We have appointed the 10-person panel. We have our stakeholder engagement groups. We have the forum for the mothers and the adoptees who were impacted. The issue has therefore been raised by them as well. We want the records to be preserved, and they need to be, because they are so important for informing people and giving them that information. We have been working with the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) and other organisations to secure those records. That is not without its difficulty, but we have a determination to work through that difficulty and do what we can. The work is therefore continuing. I am happy to follow up my answer with a more specific briefing on the issues, if the Member so wishes.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Historical Institutional Abuse: Redress Scheme

T5. **Ms Egan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the fact that, last week, the Committee for the Executive Office heard from victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse, to state what the Executive Office is doing to ensure that the institutions responsible for that abuse will contribute to the redress scheme. (AQT 165/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: It is an incredibly important issue, not just because the institutions ought to be making a financial contribution, as those institutions were at fault, but because it is incredibly important that they acknowledge their role. Victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse have raised that as an important element.

We appointed a person to do that liaison, and that person has been in place for the past number of years. We have extended the role by a further two years to enable him to continue his engagement with the institutions. We have made progress and hope to be in a position to announce very shortly some of the early financial contributions from some of the institutions. That work will continue. We are determined to see that the institutions play their part and make that financial contribution. That is what this work is committed to achieving. We will update the House in due course as to the progress that is made.

Ms Egan: Does the deputy First Minister agree that the time that it has taken for the issue to progress is now 14 years? That has compounded the trauma for those who were subjected to the abuse. As she said, it is not just about the monetary contribution but about its significance as an acknowledgement that there was wrongdoing.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Absolutely. It has been a very challenging journey for many of the campaigners who sought for the inquiry to happen, for the truth to be told and for redress to be made. I pay tribute to those campaigners. It has been a very difficult journey that has happened on some very difficult experiences. The campaigners were personally very much involved in, touched by and impacted on by what has happened. I therefore pay tribute to them. It has been a long journey for them.

I am glad that the work of the redress board is now drawing to a close. Only a small number of applications have still to be processed. We anticipate that some may come forward now, in the final year of the board's operation. Work is therefore not yet complete, but we are certainly getting to the end of it. I am glad that, out of the inquiry, the redress board has been able to provide at least some acknowledgement and recognition of the terrible things that many people experienced.

Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Bill: Northern Ireland

T6. **Mr Harvey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Executive's efforts to ensure that the legislation to reverse the convictions of sub-postmasters applies to Northern Ireland. (AQT 166/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. As we understand it, only a small number of people in Northern Ireland are impacted on, but those who are undoubtedly had their life profoundly changed by what happened as a result of that great injustice. We have therefore been working with the Justice Minister and other colleagues — many others in the House have been doing the same — to push for Northern Ireland to be included in the legislation. It is vital that it is. The time that it would take us to put through bespoke legislation here would be disproportionate and would mean that justice would, in all likelihood, be delayed for a number of years.

We have been working hard. We met the relevant Minister when we were over at the East-West Council meeting. We took the

opportunity to meet face to face to push the issue and urge him to include Northern Ireland. We see no legal impediment to Northern Ireland's inclusion in the UK-wide Bill. It would be the timely thing to do, and it is important to get justice for those who have suffered that injustice.

Mr Harvey: Are the Executive in communication with the families affected by the sub-postmaster convictions?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Justice Minister has taken the lead on the issue on behalf of the Executive by liaising with the families. We have also made the offer to say that we are more than happy to meet the families directly. The important thing for them is to have Northern Ireland included in the legislation in order to enable timely recognition and so that the injustice is reversed and their issues fundamentally addressed.

York Street Interchange: Delay

T7. **Ms Brownlee** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the fact that it was reported in the media last week that it may take up to 11 years for the York Street interchange scheme — a huge opportunity for Northern Ireland, which was secured through the DUP's confidence-and-supply deal — to commence, whether the deputy First Minister agrees that that delay is wholly unacceptable. (AQT 167/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for her question. Absolutely. There has been a challenge. When you look at our investment strategy and the proposals on big capital projects that were agreed by past Executives, you see that some have been delivered, such as the Titanic centre and others. There have been some successes. However, there have been a number of key examples where we have not been able to get delivery for a range of reasons, including planning, objections and other significant issues, despite the fact that budgets were, perhaps, secured for those projects at the time.

I know that it is frustrating that the project may take 11 years. It featured in the confidence-and-supply arrangement because of the frustrations around how long it was taking, so funding was secured. It is something that we need to look at. Our hope is that the new delivery unit that is to be set up under the Executive Office will be able to examine this issue, in particular, and capital delivery and try to ensure that we get those projects delivered in a timely way.

Ms Brownlee: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. Considering that that is such an important project for our economy, can the deputy First Minister confirm that she will continue to raise it as a priority with the Executive?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Absolutely. Such big projects are key levers in the growth of our economy, the movement of our city and what we need to do to achieve the prosperity agenda. We need to grow our economy here in Northern Ireland. That can only happen with that type of investment and the essential infrastructure. It will continue to be a key priority. As indicated, this project and some others must serve as examples to be looked at by our proposed delivery unit to see what can be done to ensure that such a delay does not happen again and that big capital and infrastructure projects can move forward in a timely way and, insofar as possible, within the budget that has been set.

Lough Neagh: Executive's Actions

T8. **Mr Kearney** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Executive's focus on tackling the environmental catastrophe at Lough Neagh. (AQT 168/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. The First Minister and I had the opportunity to visit Lough Neagh and hear from a wide range of stakeholders: those who use the lough; those who rely on the lough for their business, those who enjoy the lough for leisure; and those who live around the lough. We need to address that significant issue. We know that there will not be a quick fix, but we need to start now if we are ever going to get to the point of finding a resolution.

It is a complex issue. It was important for us to hear from people about what their issues are. We gave a strong indication that we want to work with, in particular, the AERA Minister and with stakeholders — those who use and enjoy the lough — to find the solutions that are needed, to secure a budget for implementation and to ensure delivery in order to get to the point of addressing the terrible issues that the lough faces.

Mr Kearney: Last year, commercial fishermen and their families were exposed to extreme financial hardship as a direct result of the virtual collapse of the eel fishing season. The eel fishing season resumes on 1 May. What more can be done to provide protections to ensure

that they are not exposed to the same financial hardship this year?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: One of the key messages that we heard when we spoke to those who work and live around the lough was that the lough is still there, is open for business and still works. There are many fantastic aspects to Lough Neagh. While we have challenges that need to be addressed, we want to send a very positive message that high-quality work happens there and that high-quality produce comes out of the lough. There are no safety concerns whatsoever about that.

As we move towards the summer, we need to get better at sending that clear message to people. Perhaps what was discussed last summer had a negative impact when it did not need to have that impact. Overall, it will be about the Executive acting to address the big issues and making sure that the problems that arose last summer do not arise again.

2.45 pm

Health

Care Packages: NHSCT

1. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the provision of care packages in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT) following the appointment of three new providers. (AQO 264/22-27)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I thank the Member for his question. Four new providers have contracted with the Northern Health and Social Care Trust in the past while. Collectively, they have taken on 766 packages of care, totalling 6,659 hours. The Northern Trust continues to target the recruitment of home care staff across the trust's geographical area, with an additional focus on areas where a larger unmet domiciliary care need remains.

Demand for domiciliary care packages continues to outweigh the sector's capacity to take on the work. I recognise the important role of our independent sector home care providers and have approved funding, in advance of the 2024-25 Budget being confirmed, to address the employer's requirements in relation to the national living wage increase. I recently announced a £70 million support package for social care providers and hospices. I hope that that funding will help the independent sector organisations to deal with rising costs.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. My mother is a service user, and I see the work that those workers carry out day and daily. When will the four additional providers that he mentioned make a real impact in the Northern Trust area? The Northern Trust has one of the largest backlogs in Northern Ireland. Recently, a lady in her 100th year had to wait six months for a care package.

Mr Swann: I intend that the £70 million will be rolled out as quickly as possible. I made the announcement in advance of a Budget being agreed because we have a high level of unmet need, especially across the Northern Trust because of not just the size but the rurality of the area that that trust covers. I hope that the additional money will help. The trust is reviewing how it commissions domiciliary care services to ensure a value-for-money approach and to proactively drive efficiencies to optimise its current capacity.

Ms Sheerin: Minister, I appreciate the update. I have done a lot of work with the trust. At the end of January, when one of the new providers was first announced, in south Derry, it was a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul because another provider had just left the area.

Mr Speaker: Question, Ms Sheerin?

Ms Sheerin: I have just had a Teams meeting with a lady whose father has been in hospital for 11 months. He is ready for discharge, but he cannot get a care package because he has complex needs. The trust has basically said that the only option available is a placement —

Mr Speaker: I think we have got the gist.

Ms Sheerin: — in Rathmena House in Ballyclare, and they live in Bellaghy. Can you outline what support is available, particularly for those who need more than four visits a day, le do thoil? [*Translation: please?*]

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her point. If she writes to me about that specific case, I will get back to her and engage with the Northern Trust on it. She highlights the issue of additional complex needs. We made provision whereby people who have waited a long time, especially for a care package, can go into domiciliary care. Sometimes that meets a need; sometimes it does not. However, the Member can write to me about the individual case that she mentioned.

Miss McAllister: The Minister will recognise that care packages also exist for those who are not adults, such as children with learning difficulties and those whose behaviour is extremely challenging for their parents. What is the Minister's Department doing for the families in the Northern Trust area who have waited almost four years for respite services?

Mr Swann: The Member raised the specific facility of Rainbow Lodge in the Northern Trust at the Health Committee. I have looked at the additional respite capacity in that facility but also across Northern Ireland, because the issue does not just affect the Northern Trust. Our supply of respite is constrained by the pressures that we see in cases, such as the one indicated by the Member who spoke previously, where complex additional needs consume quite a lot of our respite care.

Mr Nesbitt: The announcement of additional funding that the Minister referred to was warmly welcomed in the sector. On sustained investment and clarity, can the Minister advise what his Department is going to do to increase capacity in the home care workforce?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that point. As well as the additional £70 million that I announced, there have been two uplifts to the independent sector home care rate in the past few years. That has been done to recognise the complex work that that valuable workforce does and to entice more staff into the field. My officials have established the social care collaborative forum as an outcome of the review of adult social care. That forum is looking at many issues around home care, including maximising capacity and the home care workforce. It is working with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council on developing standardised enhanced training, recognised qualifications and promotional options for home care staff. I hope that the measures that I have referenced will grow the workforce and drive down some of the unmet need that we have across the Province.

Ms Hunter: Minister, many who go without care packages have to stay in hospital, even when they are fit to go home. Does your Department keep statistics for how many or how long patients are kept in hospital when they are fit to go home but cannot access a care package in the Northern Trust?

Mr Swann: We do. That is something that I have asked departmental officials to look at, and they have been looking at it. A team in the Department has been established within the

strategic planning and performance group, which looks at, manages and engages with trusts on delayed hospital discharges through a range of regionally agreed measures. However, I need to be realistic: stabilising and enhancing social care represents part of the answer to delayed discharges but requires sustained and significant additional funding. So, it is not just the wait for social care packages that is resulting in delayed discharges: there are other constraining factors at work. There is ongoing work in my Department to look at those and challenge trusts on whether they could be doing better.

Puberty Blockers

2. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health to outline what advice he sought from health experts in relation to restricting access to puberty blockers. (AQO 265/22-27)

Mr Swann: Puberty blockers are only available on NHS prescription for those under-18s who were accepted onto the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's Knowing our Identity endocrine pathway prior to March 2020 and remain on it. In March 2020, following consultation with the clinical ethics committee, the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, in liaison with the then Health and Social Care Board, amended the service specification, which meant that new referrals after that date would no longer have access to the endocrine pathway. That was due to challenges in the adult gender identity service, given that there was no readily available appropriate transition pathway for young people at age 18 to allow for the safe continuation of endocrine treatment.

My officials have been working with the gender identity service pathway review group and the gender identity service liaison panel, which includes clinical, managerial and service user representation, to develop the gender identity service. At the liaison panel's next quarterly meeting, which is due to be held in June 2024, its members will have the opportunity to discuss in detail the ban on puberty blockers by NHS England.

Mr Carroll: There has been an orchestrated campaign against the trans and non-binary community across these islands. I urge you to not follow that, especially given recent comments at the Health Committee. Minister, what commitment will you give to young trans people that they will be able to get access to puberty blockers and gender reaffirming services without any intervention from you, your Department or your officials?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for the clarity. As I said in answer to the substantive question, puberty blockers are only available on NHS prescription for those under-18s who were accepted prior to March 2020 onto the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's Knowing our Identity service and remain on it. That decision was made following consultation with the clinical ethics committee and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, in liaison with the then Health and Social Care Board.

Mrs Dodds: Minister, last week, the publication of the Cass review's final report caused a significant degree of concern. What action is your Department going to take in light of that report's publication, and can you explain how puberty blockers, which were introduced in the UK merely for research trials, could come to be prescribed for routine clinical use despite not being licensed for such use or there being any meaningful evidence about their safety? How many children in Northern Ireland might those have been prescribed to?

Mr Swann: When it comes to that issue and the Cass review, our principal focus has to be on providing the best healthcare and support for our young people. I echo the comments by Dr Hilary Cass about the toxic and polarised nature of much of the debate on this subject. That is particularly the case, as the Member will know, on social media. That toxicity is not in the best interests of our young people, nor does it help us find the right way forward in healthcare and support. On her specific question, I do not have the numbers with me, but I will write to the Member with an answer and share it with the Assembly.

Mr Tennyson: I am sure that the Minister agrees that our priority in that area has to be ensuring that trans individuals get the appropriate care and that their dignity and human rights are respected at all times. Will the Minister commit to engaging further with the LGBT sector and children's rights organisations before pursuing further change in that area?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his point. As I said in my answer, my officials have been working with the gender identity service pathway review group and the gender identity services liaison panel, which includes clinical, managerial and service user representation, to develop the gender identity service. The liaison panel is due to meet in June, when that subject will be discussed.

Mr Allister: Presumably the liaison panel advises, and you decide. Given that the Cass

report highlighted the irreversible harm from the use of puberty blockers, can you assure the House that there will be no return to their destructive use?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I refer him to the answer that I gave to the substantive question, which was that puberty blockers are available on NHS prescription only for under-18s who were accepted for and remain in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Knowing Our Identity service endocrine pathway prior to March 2020. I have been advised that that is the current stance on that piece of work, which was done following consultation with the clinical ethics committee and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, in liaison with the then Health and Social Care Board.

Waiting Lists: 3Ps Policy

3. **Mr Donnelly** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the Welsh 3Ps policy to support people on waiting lists in Northern Ireland. (AQO 266/22-27)

Mr Swann: The reduction of waiting lists is a key priority for me and has been indicated as a key priority for the Executive. My officials are taking forward a range of measures to address it. However, as the Member is aware, it is a complex matter that will take time, effort and, importantly, adequate and recurrent investment. I fully acknowledge the need to have in place measures to help those who are on waiting lists. The elective care framework that I published in 2021 proposed a £700 million investment over five years. Whilst it set out firm and time-bound proposals, unfortunately, as Members know, the subsequent absence of agreed Executive Budgets combined with the political disruption for much of the period since has meant that the implementation of the framework is not what it should be. Nevertheless, some good progress has been made across several areas. The Member is aware that I attended the meeting, which his party colleague sponsored, at which the potential benefits of the Welsh initiative for patients on waiting lists were presented. Following that presentation, I asked my officials for an assessment of the implications, including the potential costs, of adopting a similar process here. I will consider that in the context of advice from officials.

Mr Donnelly: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will also be aware of the 'Worried and Waiting' report, which was launched in the Building earlier. The report shows that paediatric waiting lists in Northern

Ireland have increased by 173% in the past seven years, which is wholly unacceptable. With far too many children and their families waiting for outpatient appointments, what is the Minister doing to communicate with and support people who are on those waiting lists, who often feel isolated and forgotten?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Although I was not able to attend the launch of the report today, I met people from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health a fortnight ago and talked through some of the recommendations in the report. I had good engagement with them at that event. A wide range of online well-being support is available to people who are on waiting lists. That exists across primary care, where the multidisciplinary team programme is improving access to early supports and proactively supporting good physical and mental health and social well-being. A new online tracking system that the Member may be aware of, My Waiting Times, was launched on 25 May last year. That allows patients to check average waiting times for first outpatient hospital appointments across different clinical specialties in each health and social care trust area. The new My Waiting Times Northern Ireland website provides detailed information on average assessment and waiting times by specialty and trust. In addition, the website provides links to support for patients' health and well-being while they wait for treatment.

It provides information on travelling to appointments, the hospital travel costs scheme and the patient transport service, and it provides advice if treatment is no longer required or if a patient cannot attend their first appointment.

3.00 pm

Ms Kimmins: The 'Worried and Waiting' report was published today. Has the Minister had time to consider that report, and does he intend to initiate a child health system review to identify the needs aimed at reducing child health inequalities, as called for in the report?

Mr Swann: I was able to talk with representatives of the Royal College of Paediatrics on, I think, 4 April and update them on where the child health partnership and the project board are and how we look at bringing children's services in the Department on to an even keel and tackle some of the horrendous waiting lists that have been described. As regards the other recommendations, the royal college is fair in regard to how we tackle health inequalities, especially among our young

people, but that is not solely a challenge to my Department, the Department of Health. There is a challenge to every Department and our Executive as a whole: how we improve access to education, those early years structures and supports, access to special educational needs, housing and welfare and all the rest of it. When we look at the approach that is being proposed in the programme, where it looks at a child-centred, whole-child approach, it has to be a whole-Executive approach.

Mr Chambers: Today's report from the Royal College of Paediatrics has reiterated the awful figures that many of us have known for some time. We are a fortnight into the financial year, and, still with little budgetary clarity on the horizon, can the Minister provide an update on the challenges that his Department and the trusts find themselves facing when trying to tackle the problem of our waiting lists with, effectively, one hand tied behind their back?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point that has been reiterated across the House many times, not just by me but by Executive colleagues. When we talk about waiting lists, the challenge is having a non-recurrent Budget that does not allow us to make the strategic changes that we want to make across health, which needs that long-term, recurrent investment. Look at the waiting list initiatives: the funding that my Department has been given over the past number of years from a single-year Budget makes those larger pieces of transformation that we want to do all the more challenging, but we still push on in looking at how we can develop overnight care, day case procedure units and rapid diagnostic centres while we can do that within the remit of the budget and workforce that I have available.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, the state of the health service in general, specifically the length of waiting lists, is probably the single biggest example and crystallisation of chaos in public services and the thing that most of the public in Northern Ireland want dealt with most quickly. It has to be at the core of a Programme for Government, but we heard from the First Minister and, indeed, from the deputy First Minister today that there does not seem to be any great hurry in the production of a Programme for Government.

Mr Speaker: Question, please, Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Toole: Do you believe that it is an urgent priority, and will you push for health to be at the core of an urgently produced Programme for Government?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I push all the time that health should be central to everything that we do, not just in a Programme for Government but in a Budget. That was the commitment that was made in the House when this Executive were established. I want to hold my Executive colleagues to that commitment and that promise, not just to me as Health Minister or my Department but to the people of Northern Ireland. The Member is right: it is the most crucial topic that we talk about, and it is affecting every household across Northern Ireland.

A Programme for Government will be beneficial, but it has to be funded and costed, and I am sure that we do not disagree on that. However, we are still working with a single-year Budget that does not allow the large-scale transformation pieces. I will still push for funding for my Department, for the health service and for waiting list initiatives.

Tooth Extractions

4. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health to outline how many children and young people with disabilities have had a severe reaction to having teeth extracted in the Royal School of Dentistry since January 2020. (AQO 267/22-27)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Children and young people with disabilities receive dental care across a range of settings in Northern Ireland: general dental services, community dental services and hospital dental services. Those with the most complex needs are treated in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Royal Victoria Hospital under the care of paediatric and special care dental consultants. The children's hospital on the Royal hospital site provides care for children up to 13 years and young people from 13 to 18 years are cared for at the school of dentistry.

The strategic planning and performance group (SPPG) sought clarification from the SPPG-PHA (Public Health Agency) governance team and from the Belfast Trust, and neither is aware of any reported severe adverse reactions relating to dental procedures in children at the children's hospital or young persons at the school of dentistry or within the wider Belfast Health and Social Care Trust services, including the community dental service general anaesthetic lists from 2020 to the present day. Whilst I cannot discuss individual cases, there may be serious adverse incidents (SIAs) related to dental care being raised currently through the Belfast Trust's established processes, and, in line with established serious adverse incident

processes, the trust will ensure the appropriate level of engagement with patients and their families throughout any investigation.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Minister, I have been in your position where officials, in good faith, give you an answer and you use it in a response. I am telling you that what you have said is not fact. My constituent Alex Duffy died in January of this year as a result of complications of services received in the RVH. That was an adverse incident, as far as I am aware. If it was not, it should have been. I ask the Minister to go back and ask again how many children and young people with disabilities and complex histories have had adverse reactions. I know for a fact that Alex is one, but there are others.

Mr Swann: I am not aware of the specific case that the Member has raised. If there are ongoing SAls in relation to a specific case, such as the individual that the Member mentioned, I do not have the detail here. I will go back and ask officials in the Belfast Trust to investigate. I am sure that the Member would expect nothing less.

Healthcare: Cross-border Initiatives

5. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Health, further to the work of the North West Cancer Centre, to outline what plans he has to expand other cross-border healthcare initiatives. (AQO 268/22-27)

Mr Swann: In addition to existing areas of cross-border cooperation, my officials are engaging with and considering proposals from Minister Donnelly's office for further collaboration across several priority areas, including enhanced cancer service provision; alcohol, drugs and substance use; and children's services. Cross-border cooperation in healthcare will also be facilitated through the PEACE PLUS programme, which provides funding and significant opportunities for tackling shared challenges in health and social care across both jurisdictions through partnership working. I am always willing to explore cross-border collaboration where there is a clear population health need and a sustainable long-term solution. I will continue to engage with Minister Donnelly on areas for further partnership working, primarily through the North/South Ministerial Council.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister very much for his answer; indeed, he answered my supplementary question as well. I recently referred to the Minister a case of a very rare form of genetic cancer. Will he please consider

whether there is an opportunity to deal with that on a cross-border basis, or maybe through further collaboration with some UK hospitals?

Mr Swann: Again, the Member raises a specific issue. On the wider engagement piece regarding cancer specifically, the Member will be aware of the setting up of the All-Island Cancer Consortium, which was an outworking of the Belfast Agreement in 1998; it still does good work. I signed a renewed memorandum of understanding back in 2020. Minister Donnelly and I have spoken about it. We engaged at the North/South Ministerial Council, but we also spoke prior to that, shortly before my returning to office.

Mrs Dillon: The Minister will be aware that there is a motion coming to the Assembly today around the baby loss certificate and pathology services. Previously, when the Assembly was not in place, the permanent secretary said that an all-island pathology service would be considered. Will the Minister update the House on whether that is being looked at and on conversations that he has had with his counterpart in the Twenty-six Counties around an all-island paediatric pathology service?

Mr Swann: Again, I thank the Member for the point. I am aware that it is part of a debate later on. We have been having conversations across both Departments on how we might make best use of facilities in Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland, because we both face the same challenges. Paediatric pathologists are a very small workforce and work pool, and, no matter how many recruitment processes we have put out over the past number of years, we have been unable to recruit anybody. We are therefore looking at all alternatives regarding an all-island approach, but still maintaining the relationship with colleagues in the United Kingdom. While we try to get provision here, we are utilising facilities in Alder Hey that look after the support that is needed for parents and families who find themselves in that challenging situation.

Mr Dickson: Minister, I welcome the cross-border work that North West Cancer Centre does, but I encourage you to expand that work. Do you agree that none of it can really hit the ground running until the Northern Ireland cancer strategy has been implemented? When will that happen?

Mr Swann: The Member will be aware that I launched the Northern Ireland cancer strategy and made clear that it would be delivered to its fullest only when it was fully supported

financially and that that would require parties' commitment to the service. Neither my Department nor I wants to scrimp on the strategy or not see it delivered fully. Unfortunately, we find ourselves in the position that the strategy has not been able to be progressed, as I said in an earlier answer, at the pace that I would like to have seen. That has been as a result of the lack of a recurrent budget and of having a Minister in position to drive it. There is not just ongoing work in the north-west, to which the Member referred. The All-Island Cancer Consortium is involved in cross-border work as well. There are discussions at the North/South strategic group about the development of priorities for joint research projects and clinical trials, which will be supported by funding from the Health Research Board in the Republic of Ireland. Cross-border work is therefore ongoing. I wish that I had the funding available to implement fully the cancer strategy that I launched when I was last in office.

Elective Care Procedures: Lagan Valley Hospital

6. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Health to outline what elective care procedures are being delivered at Lagan Valley Hospital. (AQO 269/22-27)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. Lagan Valley Hospital is our flagship regional day-procedure centre. Opened in October 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, the day-procedure centre at Lagan Valley Hospital has provided much-needed regional support for urgent and red-flag day procedures in response to the downturn in elective activity in other hospitals. Since opening, the day-procedure centre has treated over 13,500 regional patients across a number of elective specialities, including plastic surgery; ear, nose and throat; general surgery; breast surgery; urology; ophthalmology; gynaecology, and varicose vein surgery. That work includes a mixture of general anaesthetic procedures, local anaesthetic procedures and diagnostic procedures, utilising the theatres there and procedure rooms. In addition, the day-procedure centre at Lagan Valley Hospital delivers endoscopy sessions for the region. As of 17 March this year, the day-procedure centre had delivered 4,465 scopes. The centre forms part of a wider network of elective care centres that aim to enhance the efficiency and quality of care for patients and to help drive down our lengthy waiting lists. Plans for the further expansion of elective care centres will be subject to having sustainable funding and the

workforce that is required to build further capacity.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answer. I echo his kind words on the performance of the Lagan Valley Hospital regional day-procedure centre. I invite him to join me in visiting the site to acquaint himself in person with its fantastic facilities and provision.

Mr Swann: I will certainly accept the Member's invitation if he puts it to me in writing.

Mr McGrath: Will the Minister consider utilising Downe Hospital to deliver elective care and other procedures, given that, in the hospital, there is the capacity and a willing workforce to do them?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware that I visited Downe Hospital a while ago, when I was last in office. I agree that it is a fantastic facility. As I have made clear in the Chamber many times, I need to utilise every square foot of all hospital facilities. I hope that, when I later publish the regional blueprint for the acute hospital sector, it receives good support and endorsement from all parties.

Mr Speaker: You have one minute, Mrs Dodds.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Will the Minister tell the Chamber when he proposes to bring forward his plan for the reconfiguration of hospitals in Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. Given where we currently are at with that, I hope to do it within the next couple of weeks.

Mr Speaker: We now move on to topical questions.

GP Services: Potential Collapse

T1. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Health whether he shares the assessment expressed last week at the Health Committee by Dr Alan Stout from the British Medical Association, who said that, on the current trajectory, primary care — GP services in our community — has 12 to 18 months before it collapses. (AQT 171/22-27)

3.15 pm

Mr Swann: I have not had an assessment in writing, but I am aware of the current pressures

that GPs and primary care are currently under. That is why we are working through that review of the GP contract and what we need to go forward.

We have a good working relationship with Dr Stout and his colleagues to make sure that we work in partnership to provide a future for GP services.

Mr McGrath: Given that, last week, his officials could only highlight multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) as a possible saviour of primary care, will the Minister confirm that he has specifically requested additional funds from the Minister of Finance for the continued roll-out of multidisciplinary teams across the North?

Mr Swann: I have not put in a specific bid for MDTs at this point. I have made a wider bid for the health service within the Department of Health budget. The Member is right to identify MDTs in relation to receiving special funding. He will be aware that under New Decade, New Approach, MDTs were funded under transformation. The teams that are established are now considered a core service, so they are no longer under that funding stream. Any further investment in MDTs will be from transformation moneys that we will look for.

It is also, however, about how we expand that. I attended a conference last week about how the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust is working with primary care to promote and enhance MDTs across the Province. One of the trust facilitators who presented at the event made it clear that, initially, they were sceptical about the benefits of MDTs: now, however, they have come to rely on MDTs as a key part of the health service. Not only are MDTs crucial going forward, so is the review of the GP general medical services contract. The Member will know that we are working to finalise that shortly.

Community Pharmacies: Funding

T2. **Mr Kingston** asked the Minister of Health whether he is aware of the crisis in funding for community pharmacies, with two issues raised recently being, first, that the drug tariff paid here follows the English rate and, in many cases, is below the actual cost of the medicine, and, secondly, that a clawback in government funding is already at 9.7% and is due to double, and if he is aware, is he seeking a review to ensure the viability and continuation of our community pharmacies. (AQT 172/22-27)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his point. As he knows, community pharmacies continue to

play a pivotal role in delivering health services to communities in Northern Ireland. They have been, and continue to be, some of our most accessible healthcare professionals, and they were on the front line of community health during the COVID response. There is a very high level of public confidence in the professionalism and dedication that has been shown by community pharmacies throughout what have been extremely challenging years.

My Department recognises the fundamental role that community pharmacies have been carrying out and has repeatedly acknowledged the concerns that have been raised by Community Pharmacy NI (CPNI), which is the representative body for community pharmacy, and by individual contractors in relation to drug pricing increases and the differences due to inflationary and cost-of-living increases generally. My Department remains committed to working with CPNI on commissioning arrangements in the existing ministerial mandate and financial envelope.

It is important, however, to emphasise that there is no provision for additional funding for the community pharmacy sector in the current assessed budget available to Health. That is disappointing in the context of our overall package. The Department is working on that, and we are facing significant financial difficulties, but I want to work as closely as possible in partnership with community pharmacies.

Mr Kingston: I thank the Minister for his answer, but it is disappointing that there is no prospect of additional funding for community pharmacies. The pharmacists whom I have met tell me that they are not able to draw a salary: they are, literally, using up their life savings out of loyalty to their customers and their staff. I ask again: is the Minister seeking to take forward any sort of review of the funding arrangements, or is he just accepting that there is no money available?

Mr Swann: I will say to the Member that currently, as he knows, I have no budget available. For 2024-25, however, I have approved the front-loading of the Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration Body (DDRB) uplifts in recognition of the national minimum wage uplifts in April 2024. That will be paid forward by £1 million a quarter, to be reviewed in-year, in light of budgeting for the DDRB. I have also approved non-recurrent funding of £4 million associated with medicines and hearing services pressures and an increase of the retained margin from £26.5 million to £31.5 million on condition that CPNI agrees a concurrent margin

survey methodology and that that becomes a target rather than the minimum threshold.

It is not that there are no moneys there: I have already made those commitments to CPNI, and we continue to engage as to how we can progress and support it.

NHS Dentistry: Investment and Reform

T3. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Health for an update on investment proposals to further support NHS dentists and to state whether there are any lessons that we can learn from dental reform across the UK. (AQT 173/22-27)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his point. He will know that I recently announced additional funding for dentistry to see what we can do regarding access for children, an increase in the provision of the urgent dental care to unregistered patients and asylum seekers (PUPAS) scheme, and ensuring that there is more access to community dentistry for people of all ages.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer. What advice can he give to the many parents in my constituency of North Down who are simply unable to register their child with an NHS dental practice, especially considering the importance of dental health in early years?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I can supply him with more detail in writing if he wishes. My announcement of the additional package for dentistry included £1 million that was specifically earmarked for NHS dentists to work with unregistered children. I can get that detail to the Member in writing.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Dental Amalgam

T5. **Mr Tennyson** asked the Minister of Health, who will be aware of the stark warning from the British Dental Association (BDA) that a proposed prohibition on dental amalgam could leave NHS patients in Northern Ireland without care, to state whether he will seek a derogation of that new law. (AQT 175/22-27)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I am aware of the developments regarding EU regulations on mercury, which includes dental amalgam, and they are a cause of significant concern. The changes would significantly restrict dentists from replacing amalgam fillings, which would

increase costs for patients and taxpayers and have a negative impact on the capacity of a service that is still struggling following the pandemic.

My view remains that a phasing down, in line with the wider UK position, rather than a phasing out of amalgam is in the best interests of patients in Northern Ireland. I am, however, conscious that this a matter for the new Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee to consider in detail, given its role in assessing impacts in Northern Ireland. Thereafter, Members of the Assembly will wish to consider whether the initiation of the Stormont brake process is necessary and justified. My Department has already written to the Committee to advise of concerns around the significant and persisting impacts of the new laws, and I will continue to help the Committee in any way that I can.

Mr Tennyson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Surely, the Stormont brake mechanism is a last resort and we should be seeking to engage as best we can to secure a derogation in advance. Again, does the Minister believe that a derogation is the right option? What engagement has he had with the UK Government and European counterparts to pursue that aim?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his point. I will continue to engage with ministerial colleagues. As I am sure the Member is aware, the regulation also falls under the remit of his party colleague the AERA Minister because it is an environmental issue. I will continue to work with him as a ministerial colleague and engage with colleagues across the UK, because the EU mercury regulation applies directly in Northern Ireland under the terms of the Windsor framework. That regulation has been incorporated into UK domestic law as part of the retained EU law. The current position in the UK is that that measure has been incorporated to phase down the use of amalgam. I will continue to work with ministerial colleagues, UK colleagues and, indeed, the BDA to address this.

Mr Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

ADHD Medication: Shortage

T7. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the shortage of ADHD medication. (AQT 177/22-27)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. While disruptions to the supply of

some attention deficit hyperactivity disorder treatments have now been resolved, my Department is aware of ongoing supply distribution issues involving various strengths and preparations of other ADHD treatments across the UK, which have been caused by a combination of manufacturing issues and an increase in global demand for those products.

As the Department of Health and Social Care leads in the maintenance of medicine supply chains to the UK, my Department has been working closely with it, the other devolved Administrations and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency to ensure that the impacts of the shortages are mitigated and that patients can continue to get the medical supplies that they need. National and locally tried-and-tested mitigations are in place to deal with medicine shortages. During this period of supply disruption to ADHD treatments, communications have been issued to healthcare professionals across health and social care settings, which have provided advice on appropriate actions to take to manage patients who are affected by the disruptions.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answer and his assurance in that regard. He will also be aware that Brexit had implications for the alignment of medicine packaging and licensing. Will the Minister give us an update on that? Is he confident that the post-Brexit arrangements in that area are still working? Did they have any impact on the supply of ADHD medications?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I do not think that Brexit had any direct implications in that area. The medicines supply notification was issued for specific products on 13 February. That means that there will be periods when certain strengths may not be available, but that is not down directly to the Brexit negotiations or any of their outworkings.

Breast Cancer: Delays to Red-flag Referrals

T8. **Mr Brown** asked the Minister of Health to state what he is doing to resolve the delays in red-flag breast cancer referrals in the South Eastern Trust area, which have been caused by the roll-out of the Encompass system. (AQT 178/22-27)

Mr Swann: On the roll-out of the Encompass system, I am aware of some delays to certain procedures, but I am assured by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust that those are being worked through. On the wider

process of accessing red-flag breast cancer assessments, a regional approach is being taken across Northern Ireland to try to equalise the service provision and make sure that there is equality of service. We need significant investment in that area, especially for red-flag procedures, which have been increasing over the past three years.

Mr Speaker: Minister — or, rather, Mr Brown.

Mr Brown: Not yet, Mr Speaker. *[Laughter.]* What specific learnings and actions is the Minister taking to prevent delays when the system is rolled out in other trust areas?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his point. I think that he refers specifically to Encompass. The advantage of rolling it out initially in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust is that it has allowed us to identify challenging areas in the communication framework and in how we notify, through letters and different procedures, different parts of the system. Those have been taken away and learned from. I am hopeful that workarounds and changes to methodology have been put in place so that areas that are specifically identified for Northern Ireland trusts that have not been in other programmes will be addressed as we roll out Encompass further across Northern Ireland. Encompass is coming to the Belfast Trust in June, and the Northern Trust will follow in November.

SEN Provision: DE Collaboration

T9. **Mr Brooks** asked the Minister of Health to outline the discussions that he has had with the Education Minister to ensure a joined-up and collaborative approach to addressing the needs of SEN children and their families. (AQT 179/22-27)

Mr Swann: I have not had any meetings directly with the Education Minister, but he and I spoke about that matter recently, on the edge of an Executive meeting. We need to work in partnership in that area. The Education Minister has expressed his admiration for the healthcare workers who work in a school setting, especially in support of special educational needs. That is a piece of work that our two Departments can work on collaboratively so that we have the best approach for those children.

Mr Brooks: I encourage the Minister to have those conversations at the earliest possible stage, and to encourage his officials to do so as well, particularly around data sharing, to

support planning for education. I also encourage the increased integration of DOH counterparts in the Education Authority's local integrated teams.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Maybe I did not make myself clear. Although the Education Minister and I have not engaged, our teams are deeply engaged and deeply embedded as we work out how both Departments can support young people with special educational needs. We acknowledge the significant numbers who need assessment and additional supports. We can work across government, cross-departmentally, to make sure that we get a joined-up approach for a number of children who need the additional supports that we can provide as we work together.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That concludes the time for questions to the Minister of Health. I remind Members that, if one Member is asking a question, another Member should not walk in front of them. A Member may be asking a Minister a question, but they are doing so through the Chair, so it is not acceptable to walk between the Member who is asking the question and the Chair. I ask Members to have regard for that.

Private Members' Business

Child Poverty

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly expresses profound regret at the findings of the recent NI Audit Office report on child poverty, including the shocking finding that one in five children in Northern Ireland is living in relative poverty and nearly 10% of households are unable to afford basic goods; calls on the Minister for Communities to lay before the Assembly, no later than September 2024, a comprehensive child poverty strategy that includes specific and measurable targets to reduce child poverty by the end of this mandate; and further calls on the Minister to work with the Minister of Finance to agree an ambitious ring-fenced budget to deliver on the aforementioned child poverty reduction targets by the end of this mandate.

Ms Mulholland: I thank the Member who moved the motion. We know that the issue strikes at the very core of our society. There will not be a single MLA in the Chamber today who has not, in their constituency office, dealt with the ramifications of poverty.

Mr Speaker: Ms Mulholland, will you take your seat for a moment? You need to move the amendment first.

Ms Mulholland: Apologies. I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "before the Assembly," and insert:

"an integrated and comprehensive anti-poverty strategy underpinning a future Programme for Government, as agreed in previous mandates, to include specific and measurable targets to reduce child poverty with targeted prevention strategies, as well as robust monitoring mechanisms to measure outcomes and to enable data to be collated and analysed; and further calls on the Minister for Communities to work with the Minister of Finance to agree the necessary funding package to deliver on child poverty reduction targets by the end of this mandate."

Apologies; I thought that we did that already. I thank the Member who moved the motion. Child poverty strikes at the very core of our society. There will not be a single MLA in the Chamber who has not, in their constituency office, dealt with the ramifications of poverty. We know that

those who are most vulnerable to the effects and impacts of poverty are the children who are growing up in homes that experience poverty.

The revelations in the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office report are stomach-turning: one in every five children is living in relative poverty. For the benefit of the Member who asked about this, relative poverty is classed as being below 60% of the median of a year, with absolute being 60% of a baseline, which, I think, was 2010-11. However, I imagine that the Member is aware of that.

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

The Northern Ireland poverty and income inequality report that the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) released two weeks ago paints an even bleaker picture. It states that the percentage of children who are in relative poverty before housing costs are included has risen to 24%. That is approximately 109,000 children, which is a significant increase from 18% the year before. The number of children who are living in absolute poverty, according to that NISRA report, has increased to 19%, which is approximately 86,000 children. That is up from 15% the year before. The simple fact is that the number of children who are growing up in poverty here is rising. We are bombarded with statistics in the Chamber, but I had to stop for a moment to let that one sink in. Children whose basic needs are not being met are going to school hungry and to bed hungry. Their parents have to make heartbreaking decisions that no parent should ever have to make. I am thankful that, because of my privilege, I do not have to make those decisions. It is a distressing fact that, in 2024, that is the reality for more than 100,000 young people in our communities.

The void of governance that was created when the Assembly was down has only exacerbated an already inexcusable situation. We have talked about many priorities since the Assembly's restoration. Lifting families out of poverty should be at the top of that list. A rising tide lifts all boats, and there can be none more in need of lifting from a life of poverty than the more than 100,000 children. As I said, we can be so desensitized to those statistics because we hear them so often, but behind each of those statistics lies a child whose potential is stifled by the chains of the poverty that they live in. Colleagues and I have not been silent about the need for the Minister for Communities to take decisive action. That has to be effective action that will impact families most quickly and in the most useful way. We want to see tackling poverty and deprivation underpinned in any

future Programme for Government. We want the implementation of an integrated and cross-departmental poverty strategy to be presented to the Assembly without delay. We will continue to put pressure on the Minister to do that. There is a statutory obligation, which all parties signed up to previously, that just is not being met.

We tabled the amendment, which removes the reference to a specific child poverty strategy, because, as we have heard from campaigners, we need to have a holistic approach that addresses poverty comprehensively, including by considering the multifaceted factors that contribute to the measures of poverty. That includes addressing issues such as unemployment and support for work-limited parents; housing affordability; healthcare access; and education. Those all impact families and children. Children do not exist in silos, and, as such, we should not address such an interconnected issue with a singular frame of reference. Poverty often has a multigenerational element, so by tackling poverty across all demographics, we will ensure that our interventions are comprehensive and will break the cycle of poverty more effectively. A broader anti-poverty strategy can provide support to entire families. That approach recognises that improving the economic stability of parents can positively impact on children's well-being. By combining efforts to combat poverty across various demographics, we can push for a joined-up approach to have policy coherence and, hopefully, mitigate the fragmentation and siloism that we so often see.

I hope that budgetary elements, too, will allow for a better coordination of resources and services, maximising their impact on reducing poverty, thereby ultimately improving outcomes for children. That is why we are calling for specific and measurable targets to be established within an anti-poverty strategy: targets that translate into tangible outcomes for children; actions that employ cross-departmental intervention; and prevention strategies that work collaboratively to break the cycle of poverty and forge a future where every child has the opportunity to thrive.

Just as crucially, we need rigorous monitoring mechanisms to track the progress of any anti-poverty strategy. It cannot be another document to languish on a shelf. Regular data collection, reporting and analysis across all impacted Departments and services will enable us to identify areas of success and areas where we need to improve. However, we know that merely setting targets is not enough. We must also ensure that adequate resources are allocated to them. I am acutely aware of the

financial burden on the Executive. I know that all Departments have urgent priorities, but, right now, the question that we will continue to ask the Minister is not how much this will cost but how much it would cost not to do. The long-term economic and social costs of allowing rates of child poverty to continue to rise are stark. They are estimated to be between €825 million and €1 billion a year.

I urge the Minister to collaborate closely with the Minister of Finance to secure an ambitious budget dedicated solely to achieving the poverty reduction targets. We cannot compromise any longer on the eradication of poverty. A strategy must also address an immediate and pressing issue that will have significant implications for families, so we need to talk about the benefit cap mitigations cliff edge. It all plays a part. The significance of the mitigations must not be understated. They were put in place to offer essential support for absolute necessities such as housing, food or utilities. The adverse effects of the Tory benefit cap policy have been recognised, and steps have been taken, but we absolutely need to have something in place for the cliff edge next year.

Recent statistics from NISRA on the benefit cap reports in Northern Ireland break down the number of children living in households receiving benefit cap mitigations. Whilst we cannot provide exact figures, on the basis of those categories, Advice NI estimates that at least 2,240 children will be immediately impacted if we do not extend the current mitigation regulations. Furthermore, some of those families do not even know that they are in receipt of mitigations and are therefore not prepared at all for the impending cliff edge.

I call on the Minister for Communities, along with Executive colleagues, as we look towards budgets for the next year — hopefully, multi-year budgets after that — to act immediately to avert the looming cliff edge in the welfare mitigation schemes, particularly that benefit cap mitigation. In saying that, we recognise that those mitigations are not a cure-all. They are a temporary solution to a systemic problem that needs a more comprehensive approach. Whilst they provide crucial support to families in need, they do not address the root causes of poverty. They are just one way of easing an imminent threat.

That is why we understand that poverty cannot be tackled by addressing just one facet. We have to push for that cross-departmental commitment to eradicating poverty; addressing a social security system that is simply not fit for

purpose; developing affordable and social housing solutions; investing in education and skills development and in early years and child care; ensuring timely and universal access to healthcare services; extending access to nutritious meals in schools; and investing in our community and voluntary sector, which is already on the ground dealing with families, and its support services.

It would be as a result of working on each piece of that interconnected jigsaw puzzle of services and policies that we could build a brighter future for all children. There will not be a Member in the Chamber who will disagree that any investment in children's long-term future can only benefit us all as a society, but it needs to be done in a holistic and cross-departmental manner.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you for moving the amendment. Members who are called will have five minutes in which to speak.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the proposer of the motion for giving us the opportunity to speak on this issue. I also thank the proposers of the amendment, which we will support.

With growing levels of child poverty across the North, and with the findings contained within the Audit Office report, it is vital that the Assembly embraces a renewed sense of collective purpose on this issue. We must send a clear message that we are united in our commitment to addressing inequality in all its forms and to improving the prosperity and opportunities of all citizens, especially our children and young people. The cost of not doing so is simply too high, both for children whose life experiences are impacted personally and for public services in the long term. It is therefore crucial that the Minister for Communities, as the lead Department, makes an anti-poverty strategy a key priority, and I hope that he will outline his intention to do so and his anticipated timeline in his response to the motion. That is not, however, to place the onus entirely on the Minister for Communities. If this strategy is to be effective and sustainable in the long term, it must have buy-in from all Ministers in policy development, joined-up approach and resources. We are all acutely aware of the current budgetary constraints, the reasons for them and the challenges that they present to all Departments but, until this strategy is brought to the Executive table, it is essentially stalled.

I acknowledge the Minister's predecessor, my party colleague Deirdre Hargey, for the progress that she made in advancing the strategy during her time in post and her

commitment to a co-design approach. The voices and input of those who have lived experience and those who work at the coalface are absolutely crucial to finding meaningful solutions. I also acknowledge the substantial body of work carried out by independent panels on the welfare mitigations and the discretionary support fund, and by the expert panel, which has provided us with valuable insights and recommendations that must be taken account of.

I implore the Minister to ensure that the strategy is ambitious and that it seeks not only to lift people over the poverty line — although that is clearly the priority — but that it offers economic opportunities to prosper, break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and provide our children and young people with the chance to fulfil their true potential. I believe that this can be achieved by addressing regional imbalances, investing in underserved areas and providing the skills and suitable employment opportunities that pay a living wage for those who are able to work and that provide greater support for people with barriers to employment, such as the cost and availability of childcare, disability, health conditions and caring responsibilities, to name but a few.

It is also important that the strategy ensures access to affordable credit and debt support, as well as to the independent advice sector. Crucially, it must address the clear gap between people's income and what is needed to meet their basic needs, a gap that has been widened by the cost-of-living crisis but also by years of successive cuts and freezes to social security entitlements by Westminster, deliberate policy decisions such as the five-week wait for first payment of universal credit and the two-child rule which, I have no doubt, has contributed to the increased number of children growing up in poverty.

Collectively, we need to challenge these policies at source. The British Government continuously deepen poverty by cutting support to children and their families and simultaneously underfund this institution via the block grant, and they need to be called out at every opportunity. The welfare mitigations have gone some way to protecting people against some aspects of Tory cuts and are often cited as the reason poverty levels here have remained lower than in Britain. It is important that they continue and are extended to enhance support in line with the available budget. I want to mention in particular the benefit cap mitigation which is due to end next March, which impacts predominantly on families with children. It is vital that this continues, and I ask

the Minister for his commitment to do so in his response.

I echo the amendment and the recommendations contained within the Audit Office report. I concur that the strategy must have clearly defined targets which must be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound, alongside robust monitoring mechanisms. That is by no means, a chairde [*Translation: friends*], an easy task, but with the political will and necessary funding it is achievable.

3.45 pm

Mr Kingston: The DUP is fully committed to an anti-poverty strategy that makes a tangible difference to the life of children across Northern Ireland. It will be crucial to stopping the recent rise in the number of children and adults living in relative poverty. Furthermore, we believe that it is not possible to deliver better outcomes for children from lower-income households without taking a whole-system approach to tackling the causes of disadvantage in our society. We submitted an amendment to the motion that made that point, but it was not selected for debate. We welcome the Alliance Party's amendment, however, in particular its focus on an integrated anti-poverty strategy.

We need an anti-poverty strategy that is deliverable and that will not simply gather dust. That means focusing on interventions that yield the greatest results.

The recent Northern Ireland Audit Office report expressed concern that having a:

"very broad focus may negatively impact the assessment of the effectiveness of specific interventions and the Department's ability to co-ordinate the approach to a new Executive anti-poverty strategy."

The Northern Ireland Executive continue to be hamstrung by the absence of a fiscal floor that is baselined back to the point from which Treasury funding for Northern Ireland public services dropped below assessed need, in April 2022. Looking forward, it is vital that we be afforded the same protections that Wales enjoys to prevent its funding falling below need. We require the uplift in funding and a proper fiscal floor. Without addressing that chronic underfunding, the prospect of ring-fencing funding for tackling child poverty, or poverty more generally, is deeply challenging amid competing pressures. We feel that the Alliance

amendment injects a sense of realism in that regard.

There are many drivers of poverty. It is misguided to think that outcomes for children from low-income backgrounds will be transformed without our taking a holistic approach to the factors that, in many cases, led previous generations into the same situation. We also, however, recognise the need for targeted interventions to address child poverty. Evidence suggests that adults who grew up in poverty tend to earn less, have a higher risk of unemployment and pay less tax over their lifetime, so the earlier that support is provided, the better.

Dealing with low incomes cannot be singularly addressed by providing financial support to those affected, although it is essential that the most vulnerable be protected in that way. We need to address the root causes of poverty, which are multifaceted, rather than simply tackle the symptom. Creating opportunity for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, be it through greater educational attainment, training, apprenticeships or employment, will be crucial to breaking the cycle of poverty for many. That requires buy-in from a number of Departments, not least Education, Economy and Communities. Child poverty is an Executive responsibility. Its significance in the context of devolution is enshrined in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Building on the Audit Office findings, there must be strong levels of accountability for individual Departments. Departments need to be able to monitor and report on progress against specific actions.

Poor health and well-being remains a key barrier to tackling poverty. A focus on prevention, early intervention and better management of chronic conditions can help unlock opportunities in the labour market for those children who find themselves trapped in poverty. It is also the case that the longer that children are in poverty, the larger that the attainment and health gap between them and their peers is. That highlights the urgency of interventions. More affordable childcare will also enable more parents to return to work, thus raising household incomes.

It is important to recognise the work that the Department for Communities is actively doing to address poverty and to support the most disadvantaged. The Make the Call service assisted over 11,500 people in 2022-23, ensuring that tens of millions of pounds in additional benefits were accessed by those —

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

Mr Kingston: — who were entitled to them but who previously did not avail themselves of that vital service.

I have one more point to make, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Department also provides £6.6 million to support the independent advice sector every year, helping thousands more.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call Robbie Butler.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Was there a bit of favouritism there? You will tell me off.

I support the motion, and I hope that, collectively, we can agree to confront the harsh reality that plagues our society, and that is the scourge of child poverty in Northern Ireland. Child poverty is not unique to Northern Ireland, but our children are. It is a topic that strikes at the very heart of our collective conscience and challenges us to confront the systemic inequalities and failures that perpetuate its existence.

The report from the Audit Office states that the estimated annual cost of child poverty in Northern Ireland is quite staggering; it is somewhere in the region of £825 million to £1 billion. The financial burden not only impacts the lives of individual children but, indeed, impacts their families and undermines the economic prosperity of our society as a whole. Equally troubling is the correlation between poverty and adverse health outcomes. Children who experience poverty are four times more likely to develop mental health problems by the age of 11. That sobering statistic highlights the devastating toll that poverty can take on the well-being of our youngest citizens. Furthermore, educational attainment remains a significant challenge for children living in poverty. There is a 24% GCSE attainment gap for children who receive free school meals, which highlights the profound impact of socio-economic disparities on educational outcomes.

Additionally, profound health inequalities persist across our region. There is an 11- to 15-year gap in healthy life expectancy between the most and least deprived areas in Northern Ireland, and that underscores the need for targeted interventions to address those disparities. Moreover, the implementation of policy, such as the two-child limit, further exacerbates the challenges faced by families

already struggling to make ends meet. Shockingly, one in 10 children in Northern Ireland live in households affected by that limit, amounting to over 45,000 children across the region.

In the following moments, I aim to address this pressing issue through a structured approach that focuses on four key points. First and foremost, let us acknowledge together that child poverty is not a matter of individual choice or personal responsibility.

Ms McLaughlin: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Mr Butler: I will be a Minister for a minute, absolutely. Yes. *[Laughter.]*

Ms McLaughlin: The Member is very passionate about the particular issue, and he has talked about the regional inequalities. I come from a constituency where the child poverty rate sits at 23% — one of the highest in the UK. We have talked about the regional balance of our economy, but surely we need interventions in areas most affected by poverty.

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

Mr Butler: Thank you for the elevation. I agree with the Member's points. To better illustrate that, my name is Butler. The Butler family comes from West Belfast. I live in Lagan Valley, which sits at the bottom of the table of poverty prevalence, but West Belfast sits near the top, and I share the family name. I cannot get my head around why we would accept the imbalance that we are talking about in 2024.

First and foremost, child poverty is a reflection of wider societal inequalities and systemic failures that have left many families struggling to make ends meet. It is a stain on our collective conscience and one that we must acknowledge with unwavering determination. We cannot simply stand by and accept the status quo. Instead, we must commit ourselves to eradicating child poverty through concerted action and solidarity.

Secondly, to effectively tackle child poverty, we must adopt a multi-faceted approach that addresses its root causes whilst providing immediate relief to those in need. That requires significant investment in key areas, such as education, healthcare, housing and, indeed, social services, as we have already heard. We must ensure that no child slips through the cracks of our safety net and provide them with

the support and opportunities that they need to thrive. By addressing the underlying structural issues that contribute to poverty, we can create a more equitable society where every child has the chance to fulfil their potential.

Thirdly, it is essential to empower families and communities to break the cycle of poverty and build a brighter future for their children. That means providing parents with the support and resources they need to provide for their families, such as affordable childcare, living wages and stable employment. By investing in initiatives that strengthen the family unit and promote economic stability, we can create a more inclusive society where every child has the opportunity to succeed.

Finally, we must hold ourselves accountable for the well-being of our children, and we cannot measure our success solely in economic terms. Instead, we must consider the health, happiness and overall quality of life of our youngest citizens. By prioritising the needs of children and investing in their future, we can create a more prosperous and equitable society for all.

The issue of child poverty in Northern Ireland demands our urgent attention and unwavering commitment. By acknowledging systemic inequalities, recognising that periods of non-functioning Government perpetuate the existence of child poverty, adopting a multifaceted approach to tackling its root cause, empowering families and communities, and holding ourselves, particularly in this Chamber, accountable for the well-being of our children, we can create a brighter future for generations to come. I challenge all of us to stand together in solidarity and strive to eradicate child poverty in Northern Ireland once and for all.

Ms Ferguson: I very much welcome the opportunity to speak. I thank those who proposed the motion and the amendment. No child should live in poverty: that is the bottom line for me and, I am sure, for most of us in the Assembly. We must make sure that every child gets a good start in life. That is not only the right thing to do but the smartest thing to do when it comes to investing for the future.

As a colleague on my left mentioned, in my constituency in Derry, more than 9,000 children live in poverty, which is over 23%. What does that mean? It means our young people living in cold homes. Some go to bed hungry, go to school hungry in the morning and miss out on everyday essentials. That is totally unacceptable and shocking, and it should be shocking for every Member of the Assembly.

Poverty impacts on every aspect of a child's life. It denies children chances to try new things and develop their interests and talents. For many children, poverty also means growing up too quickly, as they have to deal with their parents' worries and anxieties. As we well know, it is harmful to their future and their childhood. Some have very little, if any, experience of a positive childhood. The consequences of child poverty are clear. It has a severe, sustained and lifelong negative impact on our children's health, their social and emotional well-being, their education and their life chances.

A lot of stats have been given today, but I will mention just a few. As Robbie mentioned, children in poverty are more likely to have poorer mental health and are at a higher risk of psychological distress. They are four times more likely to have poor mental health by the age of 11. That should not be happening here today. Children growing up in poverty, on average, do less well in education. The gaps open up very early, even before children start school. As someone who worked for 20-plus years in the community and voluntary sector, I know that the importance of early intervention in our communities cannot be overestimated. The likes of our Sure Start programmes, preschool programmes and family support early intervention programmes are absolutely critical. You may not see the poverty in our communities, physically, but, when you go behind closed doors, you can see the poverty that some of our families are facing. The resilience of our families and children is remarkable.

Poverty is much greater in certain households — not all households are the same. For families with dependent children at home, household needs are greater and expenditure rises. Some 36% of lone parents live in poverty, and 93% of those are females. Lone parents tend to work fewer hours due to childcare needs and have a lower hourly wage, reflecting the gender pay gap. As my colleague Colm Gildernew mentioned, 29% of families with someone in the household who has a disability live in poverty, compared to 17% of families who do not have someone with a disability in the home. Between 32% and 46% of children in families with three or more children live in poverty. As mentioned, the two-child limit for universal credit is just not common sense. For the UK Government to do that just does not make sense.

A really important fact is that, as we all know, households with working parents are increasingly moving into poverty. Thousands of families work night and day just to get by, working two or sometimes three jobs, juggling

childcare and ending up with hardly anything to show for it.

4.00 pm

Finally, I will mention disadvantaged areas and neighbourhoods. We probably all have in our constituencies neighbourhoods such as the 36 neighbourhood renewal areas across the North that require ongoing investment and support. The programme in those areas plays a vital role as the glue that brings all the services and agencies together to work to deliver for children and young people and make life better.

I strongly agree that the Minister must prioritise the anti-poverty strategy to ensure its effectiveness and take the learning from the Audit Office report. There is a range —.

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

Ms Ferguson: Yes. I would just go forward with the range of recommendations that are there, such as increasing family incomes, providing accessible and affordable childcare, addressing the gender pay gap and building social and affordable homes. We know what we need to do —

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

Ms Ferguson: — we just need to drive forward.

Mr Robinson: It is important to base a strategy and action plan on reliable research and informed studies. The Northern Ireland Audit Office recently published its report on child poverty in Northern Ireland. I will highlight some of the findings. The Audit Office report concluded that about one fifth of children in Northern Ireland live in relative poverty, before housing costs are factored in. The report found that there has been "little sustained improvement" in reducing child poverty levels since the Executive published their previous child poverty strategy in 2016. The report found that the previous strategy's outcomes:

"were not clearly supported by specific actions and interventions".

Accountability arrangements were not understood by all, and a lack of joined-up working "hampered the effectiveness" of the strategy.

The report also found that there are:

"limitations with data and measures used to assess and monitor child poverty".

It states:

"The costs of dealing with the effects of child poverty are significant".

I will highlight some of the key recommendations of the Audit Office report, the first of which is:

"An integrated, cross-departmental anti-poverty strategy is urgently needed. As co-ordinating department in this area, when the Department presents a draft strategy to the Executive, it should include an action plan containing clearly defined indicators and targets aimed at quantifying and reducing poverty, including measures of persistent poverty and the poverty gap."

Second, the report recommends:

"In developing the action plan for presentation to the Executive, as co-ordinating department, the Department should work with contributing departments to ensure that the focus is on a number of properly defined and more specific actions, including early intervention and prevention, and that they can demonstrate clear links between actions and reducing the scale and impact of poverty."

The third recommendation is:

"Collective ownership and accountability arrangements for the new anti-poverty strategy should be clearly outlined and agreed at the outset. The Department should provide the Executive with recommendations regarding an independent monitoring mechanism, which includes key stakeholders, to provide regular independent scrutiny and review of anti-poverty strategic outcomes as well as to identify and address gaps in understanding of the accountability process."

The fourth recommendation is:

"In leading on a new anti-poverty strategy the Department should work with other contributing departments to identify opportunities where delivering interventions in a genuinely cross-departmental way (including the role to be played by non-governmental organisations) would be appropriate and effective, and present these

proposals to the Executive for consideration."

The fifth recommendation is:

"When the new anti-poverty strategy and action plan is prepared, the Department should work with contributing departments to ensure that, as far as possible, actions included are properly costed to allow the Executive to make decisions on the budget allocations required. To enhance transparency and allow an assessment of the value delivered by publicly funded services, direct spending on new actions within the strategy should be monitored and reported."

The sixth recommendation is:

"The Department should present proposals to the Executive for monitoring mechanisms to measure the new anti-poverty strategy's objectives and outcomes and to enable data to be collated and reported in a timely fashion."

The seventh recommendation is:

"The Department should continue to work closely with DWP on their work on developing a new poverty metric to enable it to determine whether a more nuanced poverty measure should be developed and implemented for Northern Ireland."

My party welcomes the Audit Office report and the informed analysis and recommendations that it provided for taking this important matter forward.

Mr Mathison: I support the amendment, and I also thank the Members who tabled the motion. I hope, however, that the amendment will receive support. I feel that it draws out not only the need for the strategy to be appropriately resourced but the necessity to provide a prevention strategy that is at the heart of any anti-poverty interventions. The amendment also highlights the need for child poverty interventions to be embedded in the Executive's anti-poverty strategy, which should have measurable outcomes at its heart.

This is a statistic that many Members referenced, but the 'Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report' has shown us that the percentage of children who are living in relative poverty in Northern Ireland has risen from 18% in 2021-22 to 24% in 2022-23. That equates to approximately 109,000 children. It is

important that we just take stock of the sheer numbers of children whom that is impacting. It is not acceptable, and we cannot continue on that upward trajectory. It is high time that the commitments that were made in previous mandates to tackle poverty are now delivered on.

The Audit Office report made it plain that any new anti-poverty strategy should include an action plan containing clearly defined indicators and targets that are aimed at quantifying and reducing poverty and that those should detail early intervention and prevention, with a clear demonstration of the links between the actions that we are going to carry out and how they will reduce the scale and impact of poverty. Thinking about early intervention, I will focus some of my remarks on the role of education in that space. Much has been said about the cross-departmental aspect to the matter and how we cannot say that it is just for the Department for Communities to deliver. We know that children who grow up in poverty are more likely to have lower levels of educational attainment, and it is incredibly worrying, therefore, that, for more and more families simply accessing education, the cost of just getting children to school is becoming a huge financial burden. Any anti-poverty strategy needs to tackle that.

With that in mind, since the restoration of devolution, all parties have supported motions to tackle school uniform costs, reinstate holiday hunger payments and review the criteria for free school meals, so I urge the Minister of Education once again to pursue that work as quickly as possible but in conjunction with the Executive colleagues as part of the wider anti-poverty strategy. I would welcome it if the Minister for Communities today could clarify what some of the work that has been done with the Department of Education has been on the development of an anti-poverty strategy.

The expert panel that produced the report 'A Fair Start' highlighted that addressing educational underachievement that has been brought about as a consequence of social disadvantage extends beyond the Education Department alone. It said that if we are serious about wanting to see fundamental change for the benefit of our most disadvantaged children, an anti-poverty strategy must prioritise education and learning as a clear route out of poverty.

I cannot talk about issues on education and how it connects to an anti-poverty strategy without mentioning the other strategy that we have talked much of in the Chamber: the

development of the early learning and childcare strategy. Childcare is an incredibly important anti-poverty and early intervention tool, and it is vital that an anti-poverty strategy captures that properly. Working families are struggling with the crippling impacts of extortionate childcare costs in Northern Ireland, but, sadly, we still see progress going very slowly from the Department of Education, and I ask that that work be continued at pace.

An anti-poverty strategy that is genuinely cross-departmental and concerned with early intervention and prevention rather than expensive late interventions, which other Members mentioned, must have early education and childcare as key elements, and all Departments with a role in this space — yes, that means Education, but also Communities, Health and Economy — must work together in the interests of children in Northern Ireland.

Any child who is living in poverty is one too many, so, as the amendment clearly outlines, we must ensure that we have in any strategy specific measurable targets alongside monitoring mechanisms that will measure outcomes and allow us to learn not only about what we are doing well but about what needs to be improved. We must not return to the Chamber in a few years' time to debate the issue again and to bemoan the delay in the delivery of an anti-poverty strategy. How many other children will suffer if we allow that to be the case? We must —.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mathison: Yes, I will give way.

Mr O'Toole: I agree with much of what he said. He talked about the importance of urgency, but would he agree that that is why it is important to put a specific date and timeline on the Minister's coming back, which is why our original motion contains the date of September 2024?

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

Mr Mathison: I thank the Member for his intervention. We would certainly advocate for urgency on this. The key for us is that the child poverty strategy needs to sit within the wider anti-poverty strategy, and a timeline distracts from that.

We must act collectively, collaboratively and comprehensively to deliver for some of our most vulnerable children and families. I

commend the amendment to the House on that basis and hope that it receives support.

Mr Baker: Working together, we can help to give every child the best start to life. It is clear that there is work to be done. Many children across the North live in poverty, and the impact that that has on our children has already been stated. Ensuring that children reach their full potential must be a top priority for all of us. Recently, the House passed a motion to make school uniforms more affordable, and we have prioritised tackling holiday hunger and called for the holiday hunger payments to be reinstated. We can make a difference to children and families when we work together across the Chamber.

Savage Tory cuts have attacked our most vulnerable. They have stripped key services from our schools and hospitals, affecting hard-pressed children and young people. Poverty affects children's health and education and every aspect of their lives. We must remove barriers. That is why we must work together — Department across Department and party across party. We must put our shoulders to the wheel and stamp out child poverty. Much work is still to be done, and lessons must be learned. I call on the Communities Minister, as the Minister of the lead Department, to make this a top priority. I urge him to bring forward a timeline for an anti-poverty strategy. We must remain focused on addressing inequality in all its forms and on improving the prosperity and opportunities of all citizens, especially our children. That is our duty: to cherish every child equally and guarantee equal opportunities for all. That is the least that they deserve.

Mr Durkan: Creating a society where every child has a fair chance to thrive should be not an ideal but a basic tenet of any democracy. If Governments are judged on how they treat their most vulnerable citizens, surely the fact that one in five children lives in relative poverty — rising to one in four in more deprived areas — is a damning indictment on leadership here. Food bank usage and the number of homeless young families are at a record high. How has that been allowed to happen? Poverty is a lived reality for a growing number of families in Northern Ireland because leadership parties here put short-term political popularity over doing what is right for the people whom they purport to represent.

Figures that I requested from Minister Lyons show an 18% increase in the number of children living in relative poverty, before housing costs, in just one year. As of 2023, 109,000 children were deprived of the basic

necessities. To those who held these institutions to ransom for five of the past seven years and prevented action, I say this: you should be ashamed of the Dickensian conditions that you have helped the Tories to create.

Poverty is a complex issue, but understanding why child poverty is so pronounced here is not that difficult an equation to solve. The child poverty strategy ended in 2022 in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis and an economy reeling in a post-pandemic landscape. While there was plenty to criticise about that strategy, now we have none — nothing. Furthermore, where is the anti-poverty strategy? The previous Communities Minister gave assurances that it would be implemented in the previous mandate. Minister Lyons says that he is considering the next steps, but where is the sense of urgency? The lackadaisical approach to date adds insult to injury. We welcome an amendment that recognises the need for the anti-poverty strategy to be brought forward, and we will support any effort to do that, except where it removes any sense of urgency to do so. I fear that the amendment does remove urgency. We were considering opposing it for that reason, but the fact that the DUP and Sinn Féin are supporting it confirms to me that it lets them off the hook and allows them to kick the can even further down the road.

Children growing up in poverty here have worse outcomes in mental health and education. In deprived regions like Derry, today's weans have a life expectancy that is 11 to 15 years less than those in more affluent areas. That is harrowing, and it underlines the need for concerted efforts, as others have said, across all Departments to tackle regional imbalance.

4.15 pm

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Certainly.

Mr McCrossan: Does the Member agree that constituencies that are mainly west of the Bann have suffered discrimination for countless years and that our children, in particular, have suffered decades of neglect from this place and have paid a heavy price as a result of a lack of leadership?

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

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his intervention. It will come as no surprise to him

that I do agree. It is refreshing and heartening to hear the right noises being made by Ministers. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating. We need to see action as well as hear words.

Poverty is a vicious cycle. It entraps families and is nigh on impossible to escape from. We need to foster the conditions to create jobs and equip people here to do them. Tackling child poverty requires, as, I think, everyone has said, a multifaceted approach. I think that "multifaceted" is the word of the day. Economic challenges, such as low wages and colossal childcare costs, place immense strain on families who are already struggling to make ends meet. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that a significant number of children living in poverty had at least one working parent, whereas lone parents had the highest level of in-work poverty. I have serious concerns that the universal credit migration will exacerbate that situation. For example, under that system, the threshold criteria for free school meals and uniform grants will drop from £16,000 to £14,000. At a time when welfare eligibility thresholds should consider inflationary increases, welfare reform, which my party campaigned against vociferously, will see thousands of low-income households stripped of support. Even those who are eligible for free school meals face a cruel summer as we await Executive action on holiday hunger. Families here are no longer just about managing. Under callous Tory policy, compounded by Executive absence and apathy, they are teetering on the brink.

The Tory assault on the poor and the political malaise here have left families falling through widening gaps in a social security net that has been allowed to wear thin. Systemic barriers that are entrenched in our policies and institutions will perpetuate cycles of poverty across generations. We need to stem that trend now, or society will pay dearly in the future. Anywhere that fails to invest in its children undermines its own future prosperity.

Mr Carroll: I start by saying that it is deplorable in the extreme that at least one in five children here live in poverty. I say "at least" because I am sure that that is a conservative figure. The figure is around 30% in my constituency. It is not just a stat; it refers to children who go cold and hungry, children who are denied opportunities to socialise, and children whose very development is stunted by the crushing economic policies of the Tories and their abettors in this Assembly.

In the debate, we have heard fine words from seemingly fine people who say that they want to end child poverty. Those are fine words because they are abstract, and they are abstract because they are hypothetical in their aims. They are far removed from the nasty policies of the current and previous Executives. "We despise child poverty", say the parties around me who have spent a decade and more impoverishing children in working-class communities like mine. "Let us reduce child poverty", say some who voted for welfare reforms like the punishing two-child tax limit. "We need a strategy to end child poverty", say parties and politicians who, last week, voted for a new round of budget cuts, including restrictions on workers' pay.

Child poverty is a deliberate policy that is pursued by the Stormont Executive. It can only be a deliberate policy that has seen Stormont's Executive parties refuse to bring forward an anti-poverty strategy in the past two decades. It can only be a deliberate policy to follow the lead of a Tory Administration that has overseen the worst drop in living standards since records began. A few years ago, I saw a devastating and heartbreaking report that found that Tory austerity had caused over 333,000 excess deaths. That is an unbelievable figure. Why have the Stormont Executive followed their policy once again? Why are the new Executive doing what previous ones did? In my view, it is because the Executive have no alternative. They have accepted child poverty as an inevitable feature of our society, in spite of the obscene wealth that is concentrated in fewer and fewer private hands.

I am sure that we have all seen — it has been referred to already — the stat that 62.7% of children living in poverty are from working families. Those are children whose parents and family members staff this very Building, as well as our hospitals, schools, public transport, restaurants, factories, shops and so on. They are the working poor who keep our society afloat and create the ever-growing profits of a wealthy few. It is not the millionaires or the corporations that keep our society afloat and functioning.

The working poor need to see a strategy to end child poverty come forward urgently. It does not, however, take a rocket scientist to figure out where to start, and, Minister, you can stick these proposals in the strategy. We need to start by providing free school meals to all children. We need to stop cutting their parents' pay. We need to fund the services on which they rely. We need to regulate and challenge the corporate profiteers — the energy

companies and supermarkets, among others — who profit while children lie cold and go hungry.

We can stop hiking people's rates and rents. We can build public homes for children and their families and begin to address the crisis that has been created. We can repeal the two-child tax limit. We can back off from the cuts and revenue-raising measures that people are planning, which, we know, will force more and more into poverty.

It is all well and good strategising to end child poverty, but if the actions take you in the opposite direction, you may as well just tell the public the truth, which is that most people in the Chamber accept the existence of child poverty as an unfortunate reality. They accept it because you, the parties, refuse to see beyond the horizon where the wealth of a minority is sacrosanct. They accept it because they believe that the Government's job is to mitigate and manage everyone else's expectation, including that of a child living in abject poverty.

If you want to end child poverty, you need to challenge wealth inequality, invest in our communities and invest in our children. If you do not, you can table all the motions and create all the strategies that you like, but, unless parties and the Executive are prepared to act, they will not make a single bit of difference.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): All Members who indicated that they wished to speak have done so. I therefore call the Minister for Communities to respond to the debate, and he has up to 15 minutes.

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities): May I say to Mr O'Toole and the SDLP that I am grateful for the opportunity to debate the motion and, indeed, the other motions that they will be bringing to the Chamber tomorrow? I am flattered that they want to spend so much time with me today and tomorrow. *[Laughter.]* I hope that we can have useful debates on those issues, which impact on some of the youngest and most vulnerable members of our society.

I want to be very clear: addressing poverty, in all its forms, is a key priority for me. Many statistics have been mentioned in the debate, many from the Northern Ireland Audit Office report. I know that it is a cliché, but we should never lose sight of the fact that there are individual families and children behind each of those statistics, and they are impacted on by child poverty. The Government have a role to play in helping to deal with that.

I believe that child poverty is a blight on our society. It creates hardship and limits opportunity, and it stifles the potential of our children and young people. I am ambitious for this place and for our people and am therefore committed to working with Executive colleagues to address fundamentally the causes and impacts of child poverty.

Today's debate allows us to discuss how best to —.

Mr McNulty: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Lyons: I will give way to the Member.

Mr McNulty: One in five children living in poverty is a shocking statistic. Minister, do you agree that words of comfort are not enough? We are told that it is time for real change. When is that change coming? Cold houses and empty bellies have a ripple effect through a child's life, affecting their educational achievement, their employment prospects and their health outcomes. It is a cycle of poverty for those children, and it means that their children will have cold homes, experience educational underachievement and have poor health outcomes. What action will be taken now?

Mr Lyons: That is exactly what I was coming to because I agree. This is not just about warm words anymore — we need action. In fact, I have listened to all of the contributions across the Chamber today, and I have spoken in many debates in this place over the past 10 years, and I do not think that there has ever been a debate in which there seems to be such commonality. There has been a lack of interventions of substance because, I think, Members are all on the same page. We all understand that action needs to be taken, and that is what I want to outline today.

I am reluctant to use the word again, but, yes, it is a complex and multifaceted issue. I think that that highlights the fact that this is not for just one Department to solve. We genuinely need to see a cross-party and cross-Executive approach to this strategy. As has also been said during the debate, I do not want to produce a strategy that is just going to sit on a shelf, and I do not want us to get any credit for simply developing a strategy; I want us to actually deliver on it. My focus will be on working with Executive colleagues to deliver a strategy that prioritises the outcomes that actually make a tangible difference to people's lives.

Over the past few years, no one can be in any doubt that Northern Ireland, alongside the rest

of the UK, has faced a range of challenges that have impacted on us all. In particular, those challenges have impacted the most vulnerable. The most recent statistics published by my Department show a significant rise in the number of children and working-age adults living in poverty. That is of real concern as it appears that poverty in Northern Ireland is returning to the levels that it was at before the pandemic.

While I note that levels of children in poverty after housing costs in Northern Ireland are returning, those levels are still lower than the averages across the rest of the UK. That is no reason for us to be complacent. We need to work with Executive colleagues to drive poverty as low as we possibly can, and a key aspect of work will be ensuring that children who have been affected by poverty can achieve in education and have healthy and productive lives in a thriving society.

Dealing with poverty means not only dealing with low incomes, as others have alluded to this afternoon, it will also involve us tackling issues such as educational attainment and health inequalities. While we address these issues, it is also essential that we ensure that our society and economy provide opportunities for the future. Ensuring that there are high-skilled and meaningful jobs available for everyone will be key to dealing with the issue of poverty in a sustainable manner.

As we have said, this is absolutely not something that one Department can deliver by itself, although I look forward to taking the lead on this issue on behalf of the Executive. As we all know, this will impact on the Departments of Health, Education, Finance and the Economy. Indeed, it will impact on all Departments in the Executive. As I have already stated, it is essential that we work together to support individuals and families as they work to escape poverty. This means schools supporting disadvantaged children to achieve the best results they can. It means health services supporting those with long-term and chronic conditions to be able to live fulfilling lives. It means strengthening our economy so that high-skilled jobs are available to all. It means creating a partnership between our broader society and individuals and families who are trying to lift themselves out of disadvantage.

It is also essential that we acknowledge that tackling child poverty means addressing wider issues of disadvantage in our society. Child poverty does not exist in a vacuum. We simply cannot lift children out of poverty without also addressing the issues that affect their parents,

grandparents, carers and all the people who support children throughout their life. If children in poverty are to truly see their lives changed in the long term, it will require an approach to tackling poverty that is broad enough to address the issues that prevent children and their families from fully engaging in society. This will not only benefit children but will allow us to build a more inclusive country and a brighter future for all.

It is clear from the comments made by colleagues in the Assembly today that we do agree on the urgency of this work. It is equally essential that we take our time to ensure that the responses are effective. An anti-poverty strategy that will also address child poverty is likely to have a lifespan of 10 years. Given that this will impact upon a generation of our population, we need to make sure that it includes the right priorities, the right actions and the right interventions.

Given the many competing priorities that we face, it is essential that we focus our efforts and resources on the areas that will yield the greatest benefits.

4.30 pm

I have been considering how best to take the work forward at pace. I will shortly bring a paper to my Executive colleagues, setting out how we will develop the anti-poverty strategy and a timetable for that. Once the Executive agree the approach, I will be in a position to share it more widely. I note that much work was undertaken previously on an anti-poverty strategy. However, given the time that has passed since that initial work was undertaken, the changing economic circumstances and a changing budgetary environment, it will be necessary to revisit and build on that work, reflecting the changing pressures and priorities that we face today and will face in the years to come.

It is important to say that, even in the absence of an agreed strategy, we are not sitting on our hands. Work is being taken forward today to support the most vulnerable in our society. There are many different ways in which that is being done in the Department, such as the work on universal credit and the different benefits that are available, and my Department's Make the Call wraparound service.

Importantly, my Department promotes the value of work and the positive impact that it can have on poverty, health and well-being, social inclusion and our economy. Our labour market

policy supports good jobs as a route out of poverty, supporting individuals and families.

We also provide significant funding — in the region of £6.6 million — to the independent advice sector, to provide local and regional advice on a range of issues including social security, immigration appeals and tribunal representation, as well as regulated debt advice. Other ministerial colleagues will be able to show the work that they are doing in their Departments to help those who are impacted by poverty.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for giving way, and I welcome his comments. Does he agree with me that one of the biggest obstacles that he will face in ensuring that the strategy is effective is ensuring that there is a cross-departmental approach and consensus on eradicating child poverty? He will agree with me that that has been an issue in the past, when Departments worked in silos. Will he give an assurance that this Executive will do better by our children?

Mr Lyons: I certainly give the assurance that I will do all in my power to highlight the importance of the issue and to ask for cross-departmental collaboration. When I was in the Chamber earlier, I highlighted some of the sensible working collaboration that we are already doing. I hope that that continues. I say that because we have shared objectives in the Executive. If we can tackle poverty — particularly if we can tackle its core, child poverty — we can make such a difference to all the other things that we are trying to do. I have often said that the Department for Communities can make a really positive impact early on. If we make an early intervention, it makes a difference, which takes the pressure off the education system, the justice system and the health system later. I do not believe that I will have a difficult time in getting support from Executive colleagues for what we are trying to do.

Of course, budget could be another issue. The motion calls for a ring-fenced budget to be provided for the strategy. Given the range of anti-poverty interventions that are already being taken forward and the multiple factors behind the issue, that might be a difficult task. Ultimately, consideration of a specific ring-fenced budget, alongside how we measure and monitor progress, will be a matter for the Executive to consider in the context of developing the strategy. I want to make sure that we put in place a process to ensure that this later work is taken forward at pace and with a collaborative and holistic approach, so that

we can make a real difference to those who are impacted by poverty. It is not just about financial resources; it is about opportunities, concrete outcomes and ensuring that we live in vibrant communities that are safe and welcoming for all.

These are important issues. I want to highlight some of the comments made today, and I will begin with the proposer of the amendment. I am in agreement with so much of what she said. Her amendment is a sensible approach to addressing some of the issues. Mr Gildernew, who is the Chair of the Committee, talked about a timeline. I do not have a timeline for the Member today, but I am sincere in saying that I want to make sure that this issue progresses as quickly as possible. Some of that is out of my hands, but I believe that, with the support of the Executive and the Assembly, we will ensure that that is progressed.

I will pick up on a point that Brian Kingston made. We are taking a little bit of time to get the strategy right, although we have been waiting for it for a long time. We want to make sure that it is effective and deliverable. I have heard time and again that we do not want a strategy that sits on a shelf; we want to make sure that it has targeted interventions. As he said, it is not just about the immediate support that we can provide but getting to the root of the problem. Mr Butler summarised well the issues that we are facing. He is right: it is about not just the money in people's pockets but the quality of life that people enjoy. The Deputy Chair of the Committee, Ms Ferguson, very well outlined the real impact that poverty has. We should never lose sight of that. That is why this issue is so important. We have children who are going to bed cold or going to school hungry. That has a huge impact on them, not just in the immediate term but on their potential. Poverty robs people of their potential, and of opportunity. That is one of the reasons why this issue needs to be tackled.

Mr Robinson is absolutely right: the strategy should be based on evidence. We need to make sure that we have collaboration between Departments. I was particularly interested in what Mr Mathison said, because the work that the Department of Education does will be absolutely key. If we are really interested in making sure that we have a longer-term impact, education is absolutely key to dealing with these issues. He is right to highlight that.

I am running out of time, but I hope that Members are aware that I understand how grave the problem is. I hope that they understand my determination to deliver a

strategy that is deliverable, effective and makes a difference for the people whom we represent. We are here to help to improve their lives. I will not be found wanting in my contribution to getting there.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call Kellie Armstrong to wind on the amendment. The Member has up to five minutes.

Ms Armstrong: The cost of poverty impacts the whole of the Executive. It impacts society from birth to grave. The Northern Ireland poverty and income inequality report for 2022-23, which was released on 27 March, confirms that one in four children is living in relative poverty in Northern Ireland. That is something that I am ashamed of. I think that everyone in the House agrees that it is shameful.

Poverty and child poverty will only get worse in Northern Ireland unless we take deliberate actions to address the issue. As my colleague Sian Mulholland stated, poverty is multigenerational and cross-community. We need a holistic approach that looks at unemployment, housing, education and all of the areas in which we can make improvements to the cost of living for people in Northern Ireland. We need to break the cycle of poverty by having an anti-poverty strategy. That, of course, must include child poverty actions.

There is a direct link between working-age adults who are in poverty and the number of children in Northern Ireland who are in poverty. Action for Children, which, very kindly, met me last week, outlined that over 58% of children in poverty are living in work-constrained families and that 12,000 children in poverty are living in families in which both parents are working. That says something about this place. It is not just about families who are unemployed or families who are on benefits; this is an issue that cuts across all Departments in Northern Ireland. There are multiple barriers, of course, to people getting to work. The Department for the Economy needs to deliver access to skills. The Department of Education needs to deliver early years and childcare. The Department for Infrastructure needs to provide affordable access to services. An anti-poverty strategy is an opportunity to bring all of that together. That may take a little bit of time. We tabled the amendment in the way that we did for a reason, and Mr O'Toole asked why we did not go for the target of September. To be honest, I worked in the community and voluntary sector for a long time before I came to the House, and I know that somebody who does not want to know what you have to say puts a consultation out over the summer months. September is too

quick for this. We need to have co-production and co-design in order to bring forward an effective anti-poverty strategy that can be monitored and responded to and that will bring forward actions that will make a change.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: I have only five minutes, so I will not give way.

I believe in co-production and co-design, and there are a wealth of organisations that can help the Minister and the Executive to bring forward a clear and precise anti-poverty strategy that has measurable targets that we can achieve before the end of the mandate.

The Northern Ireland Office confirms that some of the many reasons for child poverty are linked to low wages, worklessness and the rising cost of living. If you talk to any Department, you will find that those issues impact on all of them. The Northern Ireland Audit Office, on page 10 of the 'Child Poverty in Northern Ireland' report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, states:

"It is proposed that child poverty will be included within a new, over-arching anti-poverty strategy."

The Minister mentioned that he might bring that forward.

We also need to learn from what has happened before, because we need specific actions and interventions, not need a strategy that is going to sit on a shelf somewhere.

The cliff edge on mitigations that is coming next year was brought up before today. An anti-poverty strategy that is developed now can, hopefully, bring forward measures that will influence what we will do with mitigations in 2025. Therefore, we need to take forward clear actions to deliver those anti-poverty measures so that we no longer have people falling off that cliff edge.

Children do not apply for benefits, but they suffer when their family is unable to access support. We need to have one particular thing — this was suggested to me by the British Association of Social Workers — and that is an audit of poverty. An audit of poverty will look once and for all at Northern Ireland to see exactly what the issues are with poverty across all society.

Anything that affects adults, affects children; anything that affects children, affects adults. We

need to see what that looks like. The Minister is right: poverty is a blight on society. It limits opportunity. There is an opportunity today for the House to support the amendment. We agree with the original proposers' indications, but we just think that they need to go further. Let us not limit this to just children; let us get rid of poverty in Northern Ireland for everyone.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you. I call Cara Hunter to make a winding-up speech on the motion. The Member has up to 10 minutes.

Ms Hunter: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to talk about an issue that is as important as tackling child poverty. We in the SDLP want to deliver motions on the issues that matter most and that are impacting on the most vulnerable, and who is more vulnerable than the children who are experiencing poverty?

Under years of brutal Tory austerity, we have continued to witness how the most vulnerable struggle and suffer the most. While canvassing over the years and meeting people in our constituency offices, I know that I am not alone when I say that I hear time and time again first-hand the common theme, specifically in the past one or two years, which is the inability to afford the basics — to afford breakfast, lunch and dinner, and keep the lights on, and afford hygiene products, and afford car insurance, and pay electric bills. The list goes on. We know that children feel that too.

Parents are struggling, including parents who are working and parents who are on benefits. The awful thing about child poverty is that it is not always obvious. It happens quietly when a child turns up to school with an empty stomach, and, if you are not looking hard enough, you just might miss it. Maybe they cannot afford to go on a school trip or a trip to the cinema. They are wearing school uniforms or shoes that are too small because this month the budget just could not stretch far enough. Parents are doing all that they can, but they cannot make budgets stretch. The cost of living, married with low wages, is a complete disaster. It is too much and is putting pressure on the shoulders of so many parents.

Those small moments of humiliation in a child's life due to poverty can be so difficult for our young people. It is not their fault but is the consequence of a cruel, callous Tory Government that do not prioritise the health and well-being of our young people. We know that poverty impacts the whole family, and research has shown that poverty has a profound

negative impact and affects specifically maternal depression, stress and anxiety. I welcome the fact that that was echoed around the House today.

4.45 pm

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. She is right to point out that Tory austerity has had a crippling impact and been detrimental to the development of children here. Does she also agree that this House, when it sat, was also detrimental, in that it implemented severe welfare cuts from the Tory Government? They were implemented in this House by various parties. Also, in the absence of these institutions, the situation has worsened, and children are now worse off than they have ever been.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Member for his intervention. He is right: welfare reform has crippled families here. Sadly, that has had a trickle-down effect on our young people, and it continues to worsen the crisis here. In addition to that, the instability of this institution has prolonged the suffering of children and families in our communities. It is important to raise that.

I return to my initial point. Early intervention is absolutely key, and a number of studies point to improvement in children's educational, social and emotional outcomes as family incomes increase. As we see family incomes increase, we also see betterment in the development of our young people, but, without that support, children living in poverty are less likely to receive A to C grades when it comes to GCSEs and are, on average, six months less ready for school than those who do not experience poverty. That can trickle into higher rates of unemployment and increased uptake of welfare later in life.

That is important, and that is why we are here today. Now is the time to tackle this head-on. That is why decisions made in this Building are so important. We need to meet needs in early years and create a comprehensive child poverty strategy with measurable targets to reduce child poverty and increase the quality of life for all our young people, regardless of their background or belief.

There is a shared consensus across the House to get this over the line: to create a time-bound strategy with ring-fenced funding that seeks to support our children in these key early years of development. When children develop their sense of self, that is the time when poverty can, sadly, craft and shape their experience in this

world, and it often makes them feel unequal to their peers. If we look across these islands, we see that Scotland, specifically, has done a remarkable job in showing us just what can be done to support children and young people and just how beneficial investment in our young people and tackling child poverty can be. This issue matters, and, if we invest in our young people today, we will have a much better, healthier generation tomorrow.

That is why, today and tomorrow, my party's motions are focused on tackling poverty head-on. Studies have shown that child payments will transform the lives of young people who have endured poverty. Scotland has gone from being one of the most unequal places in Europe to live in to being one of the most equal. In short, we have seen strategies across these islands that can help to tackle child poverty. I really welcome the hunger of the Minister and his Department to move forward on child poverty.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she share my concern that parties have had decades to implement anti-poverty strategies and have failed to do so? Does she also share my concern that when parties have the Communities Ministry, they do not implement anti-poverty strategies and then, when another party has that Ministry, from across the Chamber, they urge that party to implement such strategies? Is she concerned about that?

Ms Hunter: I thank the Member for his intervention. Absolutely, the emphasis is on each and every one of us, while our parties have Ministries, to do what we can to tackle child poverty, especially as children are so vulnerable and cannot speak for themselves. The duty is on us, as elected representatives, to utilise our positions, whether holding Ministries or not, to speak up for them and use our voices to ensure that they get the best support and investment as early in life as possible.

I really feel that it matters to meet the needs of early years, and that is why, over the next few days, my party will talk about tackling poverty. We know that child poverty, specifically, is an issue of dignity. It not only affects the immediate well-being of children but shapes their future prospects and opportunities. Growing up in poverty can have long-lasting effects on children's physical, emotional and cognitive development, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and limiting their potential.

Often, children living in poverty may experience stigma, as has been mentioned in the House. That is important as well, as living in poverty

can often create a sense of social exclusion at school, as those children may be unable to participate in activities or access resources that their peers can afford. A prime example of that is in extracurricular school activities or sports. Some sports are more expensive to take part in than others, so poverty limits opportunities and equality, and that is not right.

Addressing poverty with dignity for children means prioritising their unique needs and rights, ensuring that they have access to quality education, which was mentioned, healthcare, and opportunities for play and social interaction. We must recognise the inherent worth and potential of every child, regardless of their socio-economic background. It is essential for breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and creating a more equitable society.

Before I move to Members' points, it is important to mention that child and youth poverty is on the increase. Sadly, we are now moving towards that statistic of one in four experiencing child poverty. There are a number of pathways out of that. We should be looking at economic investment in youth work and the youth sector and supporting pathways to sustained employment. It is important to raise that today.

I will just mention a few Members' points. Sian Mulholland touched on the importance of early years and of access to nutritious meals in those years, which has an effect later in life. Colm Gildernew said that the cost-of-living crisis is only worsening, with which I wholeheartedly agree. We all see that every day in our constituency offices. Mr Butler touched on the fact that child poverty is linked to poor health outcomes, which, sadly, can be worsened by adverse childhood experiences. We are seeing that impact later in life with mental health challenges. He made another point about the stability of this place and the link between that and young people's sense of hopelessness. When this place is up and running and this institution is creating laws and having conversations, as we are today, our young people feel heard and feel part of the democratic process. That is so important, specifically when we are talking about the poverty that they experience and endure.

My colleague Sinéad McLaughlin touched on the importance of regional balance. Being based in the north-west also, I know that the area has seen decades of underinvestment. That has materialised into a lack of jobs, with people fleeing our part of the North to go elsewhere. Given the impact of that, it is time to invest in those areas. Ciara Ferguson touched on the key point of why we are here today: no

child should live in poverty. That is the be-all and end-all. We all share that view. That is why it is so important that we get the strategy delivered. Mr Robinson touched on the importance of dealing with these issues with urgency. Mr Carroll emphasised the impact of Tory austerity, essentially robbing children of their childhoods due to the ongoing pressure of poverty in the home. Lastly, the Chair of the Education Committee touched on the important role of education in tackling child poverty.

In closing, I thank Members for their comments. I welcome the fact that we are on the same page in terms of aspiration, but we are not all on the same page with regard to delivery. We want specific targets and dates. Our motion states we want to see this done by September 2024. Parents everywhere want to see action and action now. That time-bound element is crucial.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hunter: Yes, very quickly.

Mr O'Toole: Does the Member agree with me that the reason having for the time-bound element in the motion is that the consultation can happen afterwards? There are multiple different routes for doing this, so we do not accept that a timeline should not be in the motion.

Ms Hunter: Absolutely. I do not believe that we can support the amendment. It removes the urgency that we have all talked about. I thank everyone for their contributions. Hopefully, we can get the motion over the line.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you for concluding the debate.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 57; Noes 10.

AYES

Mr Allister, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Baker, Mr Beattie, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Brett, Miss Brogan, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr Brown, Mr K Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dillon, Mrs Dodds, Mr Donnelly, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Ms Eastwood, Ms Egan, Mr Elliott, Ms Ennis, Mrs Erskine, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Frew, Mr Gildernew, Miss Hargey, Mr Harvey, Mr Honeyford, Ms Kimmins, Mr

Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Mr McAleer, Miss McAllister, Mr McGuigan, Miss McIlveen, Mr McReynolds, Mrs Mason, Mr Mathison, Mr Middleton, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Á Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Robinson, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Armstrong and Mr Mathison

NOES

Mr Carroll, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr O'Toole, Ms Sugden.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Hunter and Mr McGlone

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses profound regret at the findings of the recent NI Audit Office report on child poverty, including the shocking finding that one in five children in Northern Ireland is living in relative poverty and nearly 10% of households are unable to afford basic goods; calls on the Minister for Communities to lay before the Assembly an integrated and comprehensive anti-poverty strategy underpinning a future Programme for Government, as agreed in previous mandates, to include specific and measurable targets to reduce child poverty with targeted prevention strategies, as well as robust monitoring mechanisms to measure outcomes and to enable data to be collated and analysed; and further calls on the Minister for Communities to work with the Minister of Finance to agree the necessary funding package to deliver on child poverty reduction targets by the end of this mandate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Members, take your ease for a moment while we make a change at the top Table. Thank you.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Assembly Business

Standing Order 10(3A): Extension of Sitting

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the members of the Business Committee of a motion to extend the sitting past 7.00 pm, if that is necessary, under Standing Order 10(3A).

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 15 April 2024 be extended to no later than 7.30pm. — [Ms Ennis.]

5.15 pm

Mr Speaker: The Assembly may sit until 7.30 pm.

Private Members' Business

Baby Loss Certificate Scheme and Pathology Service

Ms Kimmins: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges the grief, pain and trauma caused by the loss of a baby during pregnancy; recognises that the trauma felt is exacerbated by bereaved parents having to travel to England for a post-mortem due to the absence of a local perinatal and paediatric pathologist; further recognises the potential of an all-island paediatric pathology service so bereaved parents can access post-mortems on the island of Ireland; believes parents should have the option to have their child's memory recorded with an official certificate free of charge; and calls on the Minister of Finance to develop a baby loss certificate scheme for those parents who have lost a baby during pregnancy before 24 weeks.

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

Ms Kimmins: Baby Robyn Elizabeth Purvis was born sleeping on 21 April 2023 at just under 17 weeks' gestation. That date will be etched in the hearts and minds of her mum and dad and, indeed, her whole family, who still and always will grieve the immense loss of baby Robyn, particularly as they approach her first anniversary, which is in just under a week. Robyn's parents, like thousands of families across the North who have been impacted by baby loss, had begun to plan for the arrival of their beloved baby from the very first day that the pregnancy was confirmed. The excitement of a new baby gave them much joy and happiness.

Pregnancy can be a very exciting time for expectant parents as they build their hopes and dreams for their child and consider who he or she will look like and the joy that the baby will bring to their life. However, it can also be a time of worry. As a mummy to two boys, I know too well the feelings of anxiety in anticipation of every check-up and scan appointment through your pregnancy and of how you yearn for the

regular reassurance that your baby is doing well and is safe and healthy. To be given the earth-shattering news during pregnancy that your baby has sadly passed away is the worst news imaginable for many parents.

The devastating loss of a baby during pregnancy is too often overlooked and treated as taboo, with many parents suffering the tragedy alone and feeling that no one will understand the depth of their loss. The heartbreak of losing a baby is a reality that touches the life of countless families around us. Today, we in the Chamber can take a positive and progressive step forward by officially recognising that loss by committing to deliver a baby loss certificate scheme for parents who lose a child before 24 weeks of pregnancy. By introducing that scheme, we can send this clear message to the parents who have suffered a pregnancy loss: your baby existed; your love was real; your grief is valid; and you are not alone. The certificate will not be just ink on paper. It will be a testament to the love that was felt, the dreams that were woven and the hopes that were held for a precious life that was cut short. It will be a symbol of acknowledgment and remembrance.

I take the opportunity to read to you some of the courageous but heart-wrenching testimonies from over 4,000 parents that were submitted to a survey that my party conducted. One parent said:

"I lost my baby at 14 weeks. I just had the operation and we were sent home from hospital with nothing but a broken heart".

Another lady who had multiple losses said:

"My heart, hopes and dreams for my babies are still shattered",

and another said:

"Until you have had this experience, you will never understand how devastating it is".

One dad described how the pain never really goes away, saying:

"We can still remember the feeling of loss we felt at the time — over 30 years ago".

Today, we have an opportunity to do the right thing by those parents and put our arms around those who carry that grief by bringing the introduction of the baby loss certificate a step closer. Pregnancy loss affects approximately one in four pregnancies. Sadly, where that loss

occurs prior to 24 weeks, the lack of support for and acknowledgement of that baby and their family is stark. What we have heard, loud and clear, from everyone who has kindly shared their story and experience of baby loss, and from the health professionals and organisations that provide support to families following the loss of a child at all stages of pregnancy, is that we need to do more.

Whilst I recognise that everyone deals with their grief differently, it is evident that a baby loss certificate would go some way to providing many families with comfort as they deal with their loss. However, there is so much more that we can do. I commend both my colleagues, the Finance Minister, Caoimhe Archibald, who has committed to work towards the delivery of this scheme, and the Economy Minister, Conor Murphy, who is working to expand parental bereavement leave to include those who have lost a baby prior to 24 weeks.

Pregnancy and baby loss can be a complex and multifaceted issue, and it is evident that no one size fits all when tailoring support for families who are impacted. Therefore, we must ensure that any scheme that is brought forward is easily accessed by those in need, so as not to create any additional stress or suffering during what is already a very traumatic time for them.

Some fantastic organisations across the North provide invaluable support to help families through their loss: CRADLE, the Little Forget Me Nots Trust, Aching Arms and TinyLife, to name just a few. Those organisations bring a wealth of experience and expertise to help us, as policymakers, to develop the compassionate care and support that bereaved parents need and deserve, regardless of the timing of their loss. Collectively, they have emphasised just how significant the implementation of a baby loss certificate scheme would be in recognising the loss for families and facilitating the grieving process.

Today, let us hear the voices of every mum and dad who has suffered the loss of a baby during pregnancy, and let us commit to work together across all party lines to deliver the baby loss certificate scheme.

Mr Robinson: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out from "further recognises" to "Ireland" and insert:

"seeks the reinstatement of a regional paediatric pathology service in Northern Ireland,

whilst recognising the potential for mutually beneficial cross-border cooperation; further recognises the need to urgently and sustainably address shortages in the perinatal and paediatric pathology workforce;".

The continued absence of a local perinatal and paediatric pathology service is extremely disappointing. There is no doubt that it places an additional burden on bereaved parents at a devastating time in their lives. It should not be the case that a mother faces the stark choice between accompanying her baby to another part of the United Kingdom for a post mortem, with all the upheaval that that causes, or being separated from them at a time of immense grief. My party believes that the Department should continue to pursue all options to reinstate a regional service in Northern Ireland. Our citizens deserve to have timely and reliable access to that provision in their own communities, in familiar surroundings in the NHS and in close proximity to the vital support networks of friends and family, which are incredibly important.

That does not mean that my party opposes greater cross-border cooperation in this area. The problems of training, recruitment and staffing shortages are shared throughout the British Isles and internationally. Finding common solutions that allow both our jurisdictions to attract, retain and, perhaps, share skills and expertise will go a long way to supporting a long-term answer to those issues. There needs to be a recognition that the scarcity of skilled health professionals remains a key obstacle to the restoration of a dedicated service in the Province or the concept of an all-Ireland network service for perinatal and paediatric pathology services.

It is our understanding that, prior to the loss of the Belfast Trust service, contact was made with the Irish authorities to examine the feasibility of providing an in-reach service in Northern Ireland. At that point, that was not deemed to be viable, due to capacity constraints. There has been little evidence to date that that position has changed. In light of that, it is crucial that we do not raise false expectations as to the likelihood of a cross-border service, particularly in the short term. It would be wrong to go down that route only for it to emerge that the current skills and infrastructure in the Republic of Ireland do not have the headroom to absorb the increased demand. In such a case, we could be in a situation where bereaved parents faced broadly similar wait times to those that are experienced at present. Therefore, whilst we agree that this must be a priority for the Department going

forward, it is also a time for a careful and evidence-based approach. No option should be off the table, but parental choice on whether to access this service, wherever it resides, must be respected in all scenarios.

It will certainly be helpful as well if the Health Minister, at some point, by way of ministerial questions or whatever, can answer a number of points. Is there still an open-ended or rolling recruitment process ongoing in this field? How many consultant posts in this field have been successfully recruited in GB or the Irish Republic in the same period? Is feedback from parents, staff and funeral directors who have been used or work as part of the interim pathology service in Alder Hey still being captured? What action has been taken on the back of that? What proportion of parents chose not to accompany their baby? How does that square with rates prior to the loss of the regional service in 2019? Lastly, have wait times for post-mortems and turnaround times for results improved since 2019? How does that trajectory compare with outcomes in the Irish Republic?

In relation to the second element of the motion, my party supports a baby loss certificate scheme. The recognition of the loss of a baby, no matter how, or how early, it occurs, is a matter of profound sensitivity and importance. The introduction of a baby loss certificate in Northern Ireland is not just about a document. It is about acknowledgement, compassion and support for those who have endured the unimaginable. The loss of a child before 24 weeks is a silent sorrow that many parents carry without the solace of formal recognition.

While England has taken steps to offer a voluntary baby loss certificate and other parts of the UK are facing a lobby to provide the same, Northern Ireland has yet to implement this compassionate measure. Such a certificate would be a symbol and a tangible expression of the loss that parents feel. It says to those who are grieving, "Your loss is real, your baby's existence was significant and your pain is acknowledged by society." It is a step towards healing and a gesture that can provide comfort during a time of indescribable pain. Implementing a baby loss certificate scheme is not about bureaucracy but about humanity. It is about standing with those who feel invisible in their grief and saying, "We see you, we honour you and your child, and we are listening to you."

This place is back with a lot of hope and fanfare, so let us be the voice of the voiceless. Let us bring this change to Northern Ireland, because every precious life, no matter how

brief, leaves an imprint on this world and deserves to be remembered.

Ms Armstrong: I will start by saying to anyone who has undergone a loss in pregnancy, at birth or just after their baby has been born that I am very sorry. It is a grief that is very hard to bear, and I thank Mr Robinson for the words that he has just spoken. That hit home to me: you will understand in a moment.

I have spoken in the House before about being a parent who has lost multiple babies during pregnancy. I will not talk today about the pathology service, because I never got that far. Over the course of my 14 pregnancies, we did not have the opportunity to have the remains of the 13 who did not live checked out, because I lost my children before 24 weeks. At the time you leave the hospital, if you are lucky to go to the hospital, or you are at home, you maybe have a visit with a GP and that is it: it is over. "Empty arms" — I know the organisation very well — explains exactly how empty you feel afterwards. The fact that we have no recognition of our children hurts really hard.

The new scheme that is being brought in by the UK Government is very welcome. It is part of their women's health strategy. It is designed to put a greater focus on women-specific health conditions, including fertility and pregnancy loss, and it covers gynae conditions such as endometriosis. The scheme will help women like me, who have experienced miscarriage and have nothing, other than a positive pregnancy test on your medical record, followed up by a negative pregnancy test. At times, you might have the word "miscarriage" used, and that is it.

All my hopes and dreams for each one of those children live with me, and only with me. There is no formal recognition of them. I do not have a grave, and I never had a wake or a funeral. That is why it is very important and personal to me that we bring in this scheme.

5.30 pm

I say this to you, Minister: please do not do what England has done and set the cut-off point at 2018. I lost my first in 1996. I had been married for six months and, boy, was that a shock to the system. I did not know anybody else who had gone through it. That baby sits in here every single day, and the other, subsequent babies sit in here every single day. There is an annual service of remembrance. We take it year about in Belfast and Derry. There is a service in St Anne's Cathedral and in St Peter's Cathedral in Belfast, and I stand

beside women in their 80s, daddies in their 70s, people in their 50s like me and couples who are perhaps in their early 20s, all with the tears tripping them, remembering in the one place and the one space where we can all come together to remember our children. We take flowers to the front of the church, and the place is a mound of flowers. The smell of flowers is very strong. To think that we would have the opportunity for a certificate but that the cut-off point would be 2018 is very difficult for me to hear. I would print the certificate myself. I do not care, just as long as I could have something tangible: a piece of paper that says that one of my Armstrongs was here, even for a very short time. That is so important to me. Please do not take that away from an 80-year-old, please do not take it away from a 60-year-old and please do not take it away from somebody in their 50s like me.

Let us do something really positive and really helpful for all those parents out there. I thank the Minister and the Executive for even thinking about taking forward the scheme, because the issue is so taboo that nobody wants to talk about it. This is something special that the House can do. It is something special that I will hold very dear if we can make it happen, and I thank you very much.

Mr Butler: I feel wholly inadequate following the Member for Strangford. Through you, Mr Speaker, Kellie, thank you so much for sharing such a personal testimony.

I am going to read from a script, but many Members will know that I am passionate about the rights of children and young people, and that extends right to pre-birth protections and how we recognise and value every single life. There may or not be a speech today that reaches into our hearts as much as Kellie's has done. Members, although the amendment is OK and, to some, may add some value, I ask that the House do not divide. Regardless of the benefits of the amendment and the motion, both have value. We can therefore do better than to divide when we come to the vote. Again, thank you, Kellie.

There are few topics on which we share our experiences and talk about in the Chamber that will bring up such emotion and evoke such passion in all of us. The loss of a child at any age can be one of the most devastating things that can happen to a family. I think of my own granny on my mum's side, who had 16 children, 11 of whom survived, while five did not. She dearly would have loved to have had something in place to have them recognised in the manner that we are talking about today. My heart goes

out to each and every woman, man and family who has been affected in this manner. That is why I very much welcome the recent introduction of the pre-24-week baby loss certificate in England. As we know, that was introduced there following a recommendation by the independent pregnancy loss review, which was commissioned by our Westminster Government. Pregnancy loss is no different there than it is here, so it is only sensible that the relevant Departments here engage with their counterparts in England with a view to assessing and, hopefully, improving on what could be implemented here in Northern Ireland.

On that topic, I welcome the early clarity from the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Health locally that their officials are working collaboratively on the issue. As has been said about paediatric pathology, I am sure that we were all equally as concerned when the announcement was made in 2018 that post-mortem examinations of babies and children from Northern Ireland would be moved to Liverpool. As I said, the loss of a child is absolutely devastating, and, although few things could possibly be worse, what compounds the situation locally is the subsequent realisation for parents that their little one has to be flown to England for the necessary examination. At that moment, the last thing that parents will want to do is get on a flight, perhaps leaving behind a wider family support network. To do that can compound their grief, and, frankly, it is a cruel position to ask any grieving parent to put themselves in, but that is exactly what is happening here at the moment.

While I would really love Northern Ireland to have a stand-alone paediatric or perinatal pathology service, we need to remember why the service was lost in the first place. It was not because it had been determined that that was the right thing to do; it was because of the size and scale of Northern Ireland. Our, thankfully, low numbers of babies and children who pass away — not to take away from the pain that each of those deaths will have caused — meant that it was a difficult service in which to retain a sufficient level of staffing. Following the resignation of the sole paediatric pathologist at the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, significant efforts were made to retain the service in Northern Ireland, including, I believe, repeated recruitment drives nationally and internationally. Ultimately, those attempts were unsuccessful and resulted in the service being provided from Liverpool.

While, as I stated, I hope that the House does not divide at any point on the motion, I say to

the proposer of the amendment that my party would prefer to see a cross-border dimension to the service rather than what we have at the moment and the status quo. As difficult as it may be to support families wherever they travel — to Dublin or to Liverpool — it is bound to be easier for them not to have to get on a plane to travel. I recognise, however, that, even with the feasibility of an all-island approach, which we have discussed, such a service would still take time to establish, especially due to the time required for new trainees to acquire specialism in the area. It would also be my preferred outcome that we proactively and pragmatically seek the reinstatement of the stand-alone Northern Ireland service.

The current situation in which parents have to choose between flying to England and letting the remains of a little one travel alone is cruel. Whilst it was rolled out a number of years ago, we now have the momentum between us, with this brave motion, to address that. I hope that the debate will focus minds and act as a driver to address the position that many families, sadly, find themselves in.

Mr Durkan: Baby loss is a topic that is often met with silence, yet it affects countless families across the North and a number of people in the Chamber. Some here have been very brave and have spoken out about it; others have not spoken, but that does not make them any less brave. I acknowledge their loss.

In my years of campaigning for paediatric pathology and on baby loss, I have met hundreds of parents who felt that their loss or the topic of miscarriage remained taboo — hushed. Although their experiences and views were all different, all those I have spoken to recognised the value of a certification scheme.

Losing a child is a pain that no parent should ever have to endure. It is important to note that the level of grief is not determined by length of pregnancy, nor should official recognition be. For so many, the first glimpse of those blue lines symbolises the beginning of life, a child for whom they see a future and about whom they tell their loved ones, yet one in four families will lose a baby and will not have that loss recognised beyond the confines of the hospital walls. It is my hope that, by speaking here today, we can help to erode the stigma that still exists and encourage others to speak more openly about their experiences.

I would like to share a few words from parents who reached out to me on what a certificate scheme would mean to them. One mother said:

"It would mean my little one existed. It would provide proof to the outside world."

Another said:

"I lost babies whose names I had chosen, who I had hoped for for so long. Having tangible recognition would provide some comfort to me and others in my position."

I thank those parents for entrusting me with their stories and for wonderful organisations such as Sands NI who offer a glimmer of hope in the darkest times. That recognition would provide an acknowledgement of the significance of those precious lives and would honour the grief of the families who mourn them.

Our work does not stop there, however. Alongside the implementation of an early baby loss certificate scheme, we recognise the pressing need to improve perinatal and paediatric pathology services. Too often, families are left waiting for answers, for closure and for the chance to understand what happened to their baby. That is totally unacceptable. Since 2019, those post-mortem examinations have had to be carried out in England due to a lack of specialist staff here. We certainly support the amendment, and I think that everyone here will. However, it should never have reached this point. Five years ago, I received assurances from the then Health permanent secretary that work was under way to seek a cross-border solution. It is unforgivable that, to date, there has been no progress on that.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Member for giving way and for speaking so eloquently about baby loss and miscarriage. I recently spoke in my office with an inspiring lady who had experienced a miscarriage but was not offered a bereavement support midwife or specialist counselling service. Does the Member agree with me that that is absolutely unacceptable, and that we must do everything in our power to change that to support these women and mothers?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for her intervention. There is a notable lack of support for bereaved parents, including bereavement midwives and signposting to available and appropriate aftercare support. We have bereavement midwives, who are brilliant, but they are few and far between. I think of one — she will kill me for mentioning her — in my constituency: Melissa Crockett. She has

provided support to so many families over the years and striven to deliver better services in this area.

Unfortunately, some parents feel that they have been left in limbo, struggling with their grief in silence, with nowhere to turn. A report from the Baby Loss Awareness Alliance called 'Out of Sight, Out of Mind' found that 60% of bereaved parents felt that they needed specialist psychological support but were unable to access it. Bereavement care needs to be a component of the maternity strategy. It is clear that transformation in this area of health, along with so many others, is long overdue.

That brings me to my next point: given the gravity of the subject that has been presented today, and the fact that the majority of actions that are mentioned in the motion fall under the responsibility of Health, I am struggling a wee bit to understand why the Finance Minister is here today. Of course, we recognise the administrative role of the Department of Finance in issuing certificates, but, as Minister Archibald acknowledged during Question Time last week, she cannot do that without the Department of Health. It stands to reason that Minister Swann should be responding to today's motion, but getting this done is more important than getting credit for getting it done.

A precedent has been set by England and Scotland in recognising early baby loss. Parents and families here must not be left behind. Let us build a health service and society in which every family receives the compassion, care and support that they deserve in their time of need.

Ms Ennis: Pregnancy loss and baby loss is probably one of the most traumatic things that anybody can go through. I pay tribute to Kellie Armstrong for sharing her experience. I am sure that it is not easy to recall those experiences. She put it more eloquently than any of us could. I thank her for sharing her experiences with us.

Anybody who has gone through a pregnancy will know the range of emotions that you experience. You are excited, nervous and anxious, but, most of all, you just want to get through it unscathed and get to the point at which you have the baby in your arms. Unfortunately, for so many people, that just is not the reality. If we can take this relatively small step on the administrative side of things by issuing baby loss certificates, we absolutely should. If that helps in any small way in the healing process for those families and parents, it is a no-brainer. I thank the Minister of Finance

— it sits within her remit — for being so forthcoming in her support for that aspect of it.

I will focus my remarks more on the paediatric pathology element of the motion. As I said, the death of a child is agonising for parents and families. For over five years, the North has been left with no practising paediatric pathology, which forces families to face further heartbreak by having to take their child to Liverpool Alder Hey Children's Hospital for post-mortem services. I have been campaigning on this issue for a number of years. I was first alerted to it back in 2017-18, when I assisted a family in Warrenpoint in my constituency. I remember meeting and sitting with them in their living room while they recalled their experience of baby loss and of subsequently being told, "No, you can't access the post-mortem services here. We don't have those services. Your child will have to travel to Liverpool". They were just shaken to their core. That was the most traumatic thing that had happened to them. All they wanted was to be with that baby, bury that baby and come to terms with what had happened, but they were going to have to be separated from their baby and the baby was going to have to travel to Liverpool. That is something that they have still not got over. I have been working with that family and a number of other families.

5.45 pm

Since 2018, I think that over 800 families have been affected by this issue and have had to seek a hospital post-mortem after the death of a child. That is not an insignificant number. In July 2023, I wrote to the Department of Health, seeking an update on its work to recruit a paediatric pathologist. I was disheartened to learn that the obstacles and pressures across these islands, and globally, still exist with regard to perinatal and paediatric pathology services and recruitment. I want to quote from the response that I received from the Department of Health because it might be relevant to the amendment. Part of the response stated:

"You will be aware that the restoration of a safe, robust and sustainable local service is made extra challenging by the need to recruit a team of paediatric pathologists simultaneously. Regrettably, despite significant efforts to recruit into this specialty, these difficulties remain. Therefore, it is increasingly unlikely that any further efforts by Belfast Trust to recruit into this specialty will be successful given the current overall UK position".

The letter goes on to say:

"The Department remains committed to progressing work with the Department of Health in the South regarding the feasibility of an all-island approach in the longer term".

Just to be clear, we are certainly not closing the door to any specialised services here in the North, but efforts to secure a paediatric pathology service here have not been successful, with all the evidence suggesting that it is unlikely to be successful in the short term. We need to put first the needs and wishes of those families that have been impacted on. Certainly, my take from having met families who have experienced this is that they do not want to be separated from their child, and they cannot understand why they cannot access the services here on the island.

Members may be aware that there were pre-COVID discussions — I think that they have been mentioned during the debate — with the Department of Health in the South, and the letter that I received does go on to say that those discussions have resumed and are ongoing. It would have been useful for the Minister of Health to have been here to hear that and maybe give us a personal update.

Sinn Féin has been working to see greater all-island cooperation with regard to the paediatric pathology services so that parents can access those services on this island. That would ease the burden on families who are already experiencing trauma due to the death of a child as it would mean not having to travel to England for a post-mortem. It is time to deliver post-mortem services on the island of Ireland —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Ennis: — for those parents and families that, heartbreakingly, must access them. That is what they deserve, so I urge all Members to support the motion.

Ms Brownlee: Kellie, it must have been very difficult for you to share your story. It really took me, so I am thinking about you. It is great that we are able to bring this issue to the Floor, and, hopefully, we can start to make some changes in Northern Ireland.

Miscarriage and other types of baby loss prior to 24 weeks in pregnancy are often minimised and treated as a clinical event rather than the loss of a baby, and, sadly, for many, the emotional impact of the loss is often disregarded. At any stage of pregnancy, your

baby is important. It is a life from the moment that you see those blue lines, and people must no longer grieve in silence.

For many, the earliest of losses can be deeply distressing, emotionally and physically. It means the loss, not only of a pregnancy but of the hopes, plans and dreams that they had for that new life. Having no formal acknowledgement or marker of their loss can compound the grief. The new certificate scheme would make a genuinely positive difference to many who have experienced pregnancy or baby loss, offering a formal recognition of the tiniest of lives.

A number of years ago, I recall a constituent who had lost their baby. Their grief cannot truly be explained in my comments today but, through their grief, they felt totally and utterly unsupported. They were told the heartbreaking news and handed a leaflet. Yes, counselling was offered, but, shockingly, the counselling service was offered in the hospital unit where that lady had been given the heartbreaking news that she had lost her baby. I recall at the time writing to the Minister of Health on behalf of my predecessor, David Hilditch, in order to highlight that case. The service was moved, but I am still totally shocked that that was even considered to be acceptable.

More recently, I was contacted again by a constituent who experienced the devastating loss of her baby. She was understandably upset that she could not access the baby loss certificate scheme, as it applied only in England. Whether you live in London, Lisburn, Carlisle or Carrickfergus, the loss of a baby will have the same devastating impact. Parents who live in Northern Ireland should be afforded the same rights as those who live in England. Parents are not getting the support that they need, and staff are unable to provide the care that they want to. The simple fact is that those who are going through or have been through the loss of a baby need their voices to be heard, and they need specialist support.

Your grief is your own to share or store for whenever you are ready, but the introduction of the new scheme will, hopefully, offer formal recognition of the tiniest of lives lost. Delivering this important service will highlight our continued commitment to deliver on the women's health strategy and will be an important step in supporting parents by providing that recognition.

Miss McAllister: I thank the Members who have spoken on what is a sensitive but very important issue. I also pay tribute to my

colleague Kellie Armstrong. This is not the first time that I have heard Kellie speak out bravely about her own circumstances, but that is not commonplace for everyone, and the bravery of every woman who chooses to speak out must be commended. As Mark Durkan, who spoke previously, said, those who suffer alone and hide their grief by keeping it to themselves deal with it in their own way. Whether we, as legislators, can help those people cope individually is the matter that we are here to discuss.

I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate, specifically on the baby loss certificates. Everyone in the Chamber knows someone who has lost that very much-wanted and loved child. Whether the loss happens at 12, six, 21 or 22 weeks, the issue remains the same: every one of those individuals mattered and was loved by the women who lost them.

I also pay tribute to the midwives who take such precious care of the families who have lost a baby. That can take many forms. I know many midwives who have ensured, where they can, that they get those little handprints, snippets of hair or even just gently handle the women who are undergoing the loss. The care that our medical practitioners, such as those midwives, take is much appreciated by every single woman who has undergone a miscarriage.

However, the service is simply not adequate, and I will touch on that. We need to ensure that we fully invest in our perinatal mental health services. For people who have lost, either through pregnancy or at stillbirth, those in that service need to ensure that they provide the appropriate level of care from day one right up until the people are ready to leave the service.

I will now focus on the paediatric and perinatal pathology aspect of the motion. As has been mentioned, following the resignations in 2018, we heard many times from the Health Minister, both before and after the collapse of the Assembly, about the unsuccessful trawl for the reinstatement of those services. I must ask this: what is the plan? Are there any training opportunities? Is there a workforce plan for this service? Has a scoping exercise taken place, or is one being done to see whether people want to train and work in the pathology service here? If not, why not?

We will support the motion and the amendment, but, like many others in the Chamber, I call on the Health Minister to address the issue in more detail, perhaps through another statement on how he can work in conjunction with the Minister of Finance. As others said, the issue

should not be tackled through one Department alone. I look forward to perhaps hearing from the Health Minister, and, no doubt, his colleagues will express the sentiment of everyone in the Chamber.

I thank the Members for tabling the motion and the amendment, both of which we will support.

Mr Baker: Baby loss is one of the most traumatic experiences that a person can go through in their lifetime. Pregnancy should be a time of hope, joy and excitement that is filled with memories for prospective parents. Unfortunately, for women who suffer miscarriage and baby loss, nothing could be further from the truth. The loss of a baby can have far-reaching impacts on the lives of not just the parents but the wider family. It is only right that the grief experienced by many should be acknowledged through a certificate scheme.

Many of my family and friends have experienced pregnancy loss, stillbirth, miscarriage or their babies passing away just days or weeks after birth. I know the love that they have for their babies and that they think about them every day. It is truly heartbreaking. Life just is not fair, but we can send a message today that we care, so I ask everyone to, please, support this important motion.

Mr Middleton: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important motion. Indeed, I pay tribute to all who have already spoken, particularly Kellie for making her important contribution and for sharing her experience of loss.

Losing a baby at any stage during or after pregnancy is, without doubt, one of the most difficult experiences that anyone can go through. The trauma, the grief and the often unanswered questions are tragic for grieving mothers, fathers and their loved ones. Losing a baby has a profound and lasting impact on people's lives. We must act together to provide a method of recognising the life that existed and the loss of that precious life. For the many who have, sadly, had to experience the pain of losing their baby, the lack of a formal process to acknowledge the loss of life and the fact that their baby existed is incredibly significant.

I speak from personal experience: my wife experienced several baby losses prior to 24 weeks. The excitement that comes with pregnancy, the bonding, the planning, the life that exists within and the terrible, painful, sudden and traumatic loss prove to make the grieving process all the harder. In our case, when medical professionals could not find an

answer as to why, we, of course, were left with a very painful and private grief, with no formal way of acknowledging the loss due to not reaching certain date-based thresholds. The pain in those instances is much more than just physical, and we, as a family unit, know that a formal certificate to mark our babies' lives would have helped profoundly in our journey.

Baby loss certificates are a tangible and meaningful way for grieving parents and loved ones to recognise and grieve their profound loss. Such a certificate would serve as a reminder that they are not alone, that their baby's life mattered and that their baby will never be forgotten. It is important to pay tribute to the many groups, charities and individuals who, over the years, have worked tirelessly to provide support to bereaved families. Such organisations are strong advocates for the many babies who have, sadly, passed away, unaccounted for on death registers but forever loved and missed in their parents' lives.

I specifically want to mention Julie-Ann, from my constituency, and all those at Life After Loss who provide much-needed support, comfort and friendship to the many families who have, sadly, lost their babies during pregnancy. Julie-Ann, like many other women, has her own story of loss that she has bravely shared, and, for years, she has used her story as motivation to help others. Julie-Ann recognises the difference that a baby loss certificate would have made to her journey, and she actively and passionately advocates for the scheme to be formalised. The introduction of certificates may seem like a small step forward. However, it would be a powerful, compassionate and empathetic way of supporting the many families in all our constituencies who face tremendous loss.

There are, of course, wider challenges, such as the stigma around openly talking about pregnancy loss, the feelings of isolation and, for some, self-blame. We, as public representatives, have the power to encourage change, to talk about our journeys and to open the door to those who have their own experiences of loss. Of course, every story is unique and deeply personal. In order to provide better and much more compassionate help, we must listen to those who have walked that journey.

6.00 pm

Mrs Dillon: I begin, like others, by thanking Kellie for sharing her very personal story about the loss of her babies. As others have mentioned, we are thinking of all the families

who have suffered the loss of a child or children.

Over the past week, I have spoken to numerous people who have reached out to me to talk about the need for a baby loss certificate. I am pleased to hear that there is a large degree of consensus during the debate, and I hope that it means that the Finance Minister will be able to implement the certificate sooner rather than later. I thank the Minister for her positive response during Question Time last week to a question about the baby loss certificates. There are no words to describe how much it will mean to parents and families who have suffered the loss to have official recognition of their loss and official acknowledgement that the child existed and was and is a part of their family. It is important to recognise that many organisations and families have found ways to acknowledge and remember their children. I will specifically mention the Remember Me registry, and one of the babies on it is baby Peter Carberry from Coalisland. He is the firstborn son of Shauna and Tony Carberry. Because they lost him pre 24 weeks, there was no birth or death certificate. They had to ask for the remains of their precious son to be returned to them for burial, something that should happen naturally where there are remains. That happened 23 years ago, but he was and is very much part of their family and will never be forgotten. The Remember Me registry has a "Little Angels" page that provides a memorial space for babies, a baby loss certificate and a QR code for their memorial place, if they have one. It provides comfort in the absence of anything else.

When Shauna was pregnant with her last son, she went into pre-term labour and had a meeting at her bedside to advise her and Tony that, if labour continued that day and the baby was born before midnight, it would be a miscarriage: nothing. If born after midnight, birth and death would be registered. It was the most horrible night and will never be forgotten. Thankfully, Ross did survive. I know him, and he is a beautiful, healthy 15-year-old boy. Had he not got through that day, there would be no official record that he ever existed. I hope that we will support this: everyone who wishes for it should have the opportunity to have a baby loss certificate. There should be a straightforward application process for all those who want it.

On the paediatric pathology, it is important that we have a service on this island so that families do not have to put their babies on a plane to go to England. It is very important. We have lost members of our family, and, thankfully — not that you would say "thankfully" — it was many

years ago when we had paediatric pathology. I cannot imagine how they would have felt if they had to put their baby on a plane to England. It is important that, somehow, we find a way to have a service on this island for the families who need it, because it would be unbearable to put your child on a plane when all you want to do is take them home and bury them.

Mr McGrath: This is not an easy motion to speak on. It deals with deeply emotive subjects that can be incredibly traumatising for women and families, and it is focused on the loss of the most innocent of lives. All of us across the House only want the best for our families and children. While many of us differ on policy in this place, often quite heatedly at times, we can recognise our shared humanity and share our human stories. I am grateful and thankful to Kellie, Gary and others for telling their stories. It enriches the discussion and helps us to understand exactly what we are discussing. It is the sense of shared humanity that we are discussing today, and that must be our starting point. If that is the starting point, any changes to policy that follow will be coming from the right place.

In our present state, parents who lose a baby — I appreciate that that is imperfect language — during pregnancy must travel to England for the child's post-mortem. Whilst I appreciate that HSC will pay for the travel and accommodation and that staff will help and provide care, dignity and compassion throughout, it feels unfair that we cannot provide that service here. It is regrettable that we are in a position where although we have tried to restore our regional paediatric pathology service, despite repeated attempts, it has just failed. It is also regrettable that, despite attempts by the Health and Social Care Board in the past to approach providers in the South, no provider could be found to offer that service for those from the North.

All of us want the best for our families and children. A singular thing that we could do for them, if they choose, is to provide that certificate in their baby's memory to recognise that they had a life, they were loved and they were part of a family. I have seen that love and sense of family at events that I have attended — annual events that are organised by Sands — within the constituency. I have been able to join parents and share a moment with them. It is only a moment for me but it is their life that they are living day and daily. To have some sort of recognition, in the form of a certificate, would be very much welcomed. For those reasons, the SDLP is happy to support the motion and the amendment. There is clearly work that we should be doing, and it should be our priority to

provide that service for families and children here.

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and on the development of a baby loss certificate scheme for parents who have lost a baby during pregnancy before 24 weeks.

At the outset, I pay tribute to those women and parents, who have gone through the heartache of losing a baby during pregnancy, for shining a light on the issue and for sharing their stories publicly to encourage change. I know that that is not easy. The loss of a baby is a tragic thing for any family to experience and it is also very personal. To share that experience publicly, to campaign for change, takes a lot of courage and a lot of selflessness. I thank all those parents, including those in the Chamber, and the health professionals and organisations that support those who have suffered loss, who got in touch and shared their stories with me and colleagues in advance of the debate today. We should do everything in our power to support those who have had to endure the pain of losing a baby.

Although the motion is broadly framed, and whilst the health matters referred to in the motion are obviously important, the focus of my response is on the registration and certification of life events, which is a core function of my Department.

Many of us will have first-hand experience of the registration service at both the happiest and saddest times of our lives. I feel strongly that its work should be extended to include a baby loss certificate scheme. As you will be aware, under current legislation, the death of a baby is only officially recognised if it occurs after the 24th week of pregnancy. In those awful circumstances, the death is recognised as a stillbirth. The parents of a stillborn child can register the stillbirth of their baby and obtain a certificate that recognises their baby's existence. In my view, it is important that the same recognition be afforded to parents who have lost a baby before 24 weeks.

While many early pregnancy losses go unreported, it is estimated, as others have said, that one in four pregnancies ends in loss during pregnancy or birth. Baby loss clearly touches many families across our community. It impacts on people from many different walks of life and backgrounds. It unites people from across society in a shared suffering that is all too often born in silence. A certificate will not reverse or undo the pain that baby loss inflicts on women and families, but the introduction of a voluntary

baby loss certificate scheme may, in some way, help parents to process their loss. The scheme would give bereaved families the opportunity to have formal recognition of their loss. It could help many of them to recognise that the suffering that they feel is valid, their experience is common — more common than it ought to be — and that its impact is real. It could help to start conversations with family members and friends, bringing this experience into the light, making it part of the family's story and helping with the grieving process.

My expectation is that a baby loss certificate scheme would be voluntary and that, of course, there would be no pressure on parents to use the service. My hope is that it would give families the same benefits as have been experienced where the scheme has been introduced and that it would help those families who choose to avail themselves of it. In taking forward the scheme, it is important that we work quickly and efficiently. In correspondence this week, the Health Minister and I affirmed our commitment to work across government on the proposals. The Department of Health is engaging with its counterpart in England as the new system there is embedded. In parallel, I have asked my officials to work with the Department of Health to consider how such a scheme can be implemented here, with the aim of providing the best possible outcome for bereaved parents who wish to have their baby loss formally recognised; I want to see that progressed as quickly as possible.

I thank the proposer of the motion and all those who have made important contributions to today's debate; they will help to shape the development of the scheme.

Mr Speaker: I call Diane Dodds to make a winding-up speech.

Mrs Dodds: In addressing the motion and winding up on the amendment, I not only acknowledge the importance of the issue but agree with our colleague Mark Durkan whose contribution indicated that there are two separate issues and that it would perhaps have been better had we dealt with them separately so that the Health Minister could have been here to deal with the issue of the lack of a paediatric pathology service in Northern Ireland. We are where we are, however, and we support the motion and, obviously, the amendment.

The issues are emotional and difficult, and we should acknowledge and thank the Chair of the Health Committee, Liz Kimmins, for bringing to the fore the stories of so many people who had contacted her. One thing that all of us in the

Chamber have agreed on is that we must do better to support those who are affected by early baby loss. We all know, when we hear of a pregnancy, that that is the start of hopes, dreams and all that is so important, but we have also heard in the debate that, in the United Kingdom, an estimated 25,000 pregnancies end through miscarriage. It is the most common complication of pregnancy, so it is a really significant issue that we have to deal with. A certificate for those who have had a miscarriage or lost a baby through an ectopic pregnancy prior to 24 weeks is therefore a small but important acknowledgement of that child's life.

We have also all agreed on this: a certificate is not enough. We must look at how clinicians support mothers and parents. I have heard the loss of a baby through miscarriage be referred to as a "clinical episode" or by some other term that is cold. We really must get away from language that takes away from the loss. There are some absolutely brilliant examples of training for midwives, for example, but more training and more knowledge will be required to make the process better for everyone. We should look at not only the baby loss certificate, which is important in itself, but the training that we give and how we address the issue with parents. As our colleague Cheryl Brownlee indicated, to simply be sent home from hospital with a leaflet is a fairly brutal experience for new parents.

6.15 pm

The second part of the motion is about the lack of a child pathology service. I think that all of us in the Chamber agree — I will not labour the point — that, as Robbie Butler said, it is cruel to not have that service in Northern Ireland, or least have access to it on a wider all-island basis. That is important, and we should be working towards it. If we see ourselves as a compassionate society, it is important to do that.

There has been a failure to address these issues. There are many huge issues that the Assembly must address. We must have a Budget, a Programme for Government and all these things, but it is sometimes the simple things that actually make a difference. That is very important. I want us to ensure that we look at all options to ensure that this issue is resolved. It has gone on now for five or six years, and that is far too long for it to have persisted. Perhaps it would —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs Dodds: — be good to hear from the Health Minister on the issue.

In closing, I want to say: thank you, Kellie, for sharing your story. You make a massively important point about the cut-off date, and I hope that the Finance Minister picks up that point in developing the scheme.

Ms Flynn: I sincerely thank every Member who has spoken during the debate. It has been said a few times, but it really does not get more personal than Members choosing to share their own wee bits of personal recollection and accounts of their experience of baby loss. It is an emotional debate for many Members. As Diane said, that is reflective of how emotional, how personal and how real this is for all the people we represent, because we are reflective of the communities that we come from. How the debate has gone across the Chamber is reflective of how people feel about these issues. Sadly, many, many people have been through it. We all know the importance of it, I am sure, having been through it ourselves or if a family member, a friend or a relative has. We all get the importance of it and the emotion around it.

For an issue that clearly has been felt by so many people, it has, historically, been overlooked for a really long time. If we can introduce certificates to acknowledge the loss of a wee baby before the 24-week period, that will be a brilliant initiative. Some of the groups have highlighted that certificates are only one option in trying to help support people after baby loss but that there are other issues around support services and education and awareness of the issues.

I have no doubt that it has been particularly difficult for the Members who told their personal stories. One of the first conversations that Kellie and I had in Stormont was before I had even started my IVF, and I still, to this day, appreciate Kellie's openness and kindness when she spoke about her own experience. Gary spoke about his experience and talked about how you start bonding with a baby in early pregnancy and about all that self-blame. No matter how soon or how late you lose a baby in pregnancy, you still go through all the emotions and all the feelings.

I have spoken previously about my experience. The Assembly was not sitting at the time but, after my first round of IVF, we fell pregnant. I lost the pregnancy very early on. I was only eight weeks pregnant, but, even still, that was eight weeks of love, happiness and joy. Although it can be really hard to speak publicly,

it is important to do that. I was terrified the first time that I did it and I was not even planning on doing it, but I did it with a wee bit of determination in the back of my head thinking that it might help someone else. There is still loads of stigma around the issue, so, when you can speak up, try to do it, because it helps.

I hope that today's debate has given some comfort to the many families who have been going through the trauma of baby loss and who, sadly, will continue to go through it. I am very conscious that every journey is different. The circumstances and timing of every baby loss and pregnancy are different; everything about each journey is different. Hopefully, no one feels offended, due to what their circumstances were. The point is that it is all out of love for the people who have gone through baby loss. With today's motion, we are trying to bring support and comfort through the certificates.

It is a huge additional pain and trauma to not have access to post-mortem services here in the North or across the island. My brain cannot imagine what a family goes through in those circumstances. First, they lose their wee baby, and then they do not have access to a post-mortem. I cannot imagine what that is like. The reinstatement of those services is separate from the Minister of Finance, but, judging from tonight's debate, it is an issue that all Members across the Chamber would like to pick up and see how we can support the Department of Health to, maybe, bring something forward. Mark said that not having the service, and the associated delays, were unacceptable, and Sinéad said that 800 families had been impacted since 2018. That really is not good enough. Following today's debate, if we can get the certificates over the line, then brilliant, but also, and this is outside Caoimhe's remit, if we could come together to try to make progress on the pathology service, it would make a massive difference to families who are going through the most unimaginable pain and trauma and are then having to travel. In the case that Linda mentioned, the family was separated from its wee baby, which is terrible.

I am sorry that I did not take notes when everyone was speaking, but I was listening to you all. Kellie's remarks in which she shared her experience were so powerful. Gary's comments really hit home with me too; thank you for that, Gary. Liz and Linda shared some personal accounts, and Mark spoke about the bereavement counsellor in his constituency and all the great work that she does. Cara also made an intervention on those bereavement services. Diane touched on that as well and spoke about the training for clinicians and the

importance of the language that they use, because, as we have all said, it does not get any more emotive or personal than this. Therefore, if we can do any good from today's motion, let us do it. Thanks very much.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges the grief, pain and trauma caused by the loss of a baby during pregnancy; recognises that the trauma felt is exacerbated by bereaved parents having to travel to England for a post-mortem due to the absence of a local perinatal and paediatric pathologist; seeks the reinstatement of a regional paediatric pathology service in Northern Ireland, whilst recognising the potential for mutually beneficial cross-border cooperation; further recognises the need to urgently and sustainably address shortages in the perinatal and paediatric pathology workforce; believes parents should have the option to have their child's memory recorded with an official certificate free of charge; and calls on the Minister of Finance to develop a baby loss certificate scheme for those parents who have lost a baby during pregnancy before 24 weeks.

Adjourned at 6.23 pm.