



# Official Report (Hansard)

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Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)  
Brett, Phillip (North Belfast)  
Brogan, Miss Nicola (West Tyrone)  
Brooks, David (East Belfast)  
Brownlee, Ms Cheryl (East Antrim)  
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)  
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Buckley, Jonathan (Upper Bann)  
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)  
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)  
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)  
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)  
Chambers, Alan (North Down)  
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)  
Crawford, Colin (North Antrim)  
Delargy, Pádraig (Foyle)  
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)  
Dillon, Mrs Linda (Mid Ulster)  
Dodds, Mrs Diane (Upper Bann)  
Dolan, Miss Jemma (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Donnelly, Danny (East Antrim)  
Dunne, Stephen (North Down)  
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)  
Egan, Ms Connie (North Down)  
Elliott, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Ennis, Mrs Sinéad (South Down)  
Erskine, Mrs Deborah (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Ferguson, Mrs Ciara (Foyle)  
Flynn, Miss Órlaithí (West Belfast)  
Forsythe, Ms Diane (South Down)  
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)  
Gaston, Timothy (North Antrim)  
Gildernew, Colm (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)  
Guy, Mrs Michelle (Lagan Valley)  
Hargey, Miss Deirdre (South Belfast)  
Harvey, Harry (Strangford)  
Honeyford, David (Lagan Valley)  
Hunter, Ms Cara (East Londonderry)  
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Poots, Edwin (Speaker)  
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Robinson, Alan (East Londonderry)  
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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 16 September 2024

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Matter of the Day

### Casement Park: British Government Announcement

**Mr Speaker:** Aisling Reilly has been given leave to make a statement on the United Kingdom Government's announcement on Casement Park, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should indicate that by rising in their place and continuing 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, and I will not take points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business is concluded.

**Miss Reilly:** Hosting the UEFA Euro 2028 games at Casement Park would have been an epic opportunity to showcase the very best of our island on a world stage. Unfortunately, the British Government, with their announcement late on Friday night, have now spurned the opportunity to host the Euros. The announcement was hugely disappointing to those of us who recognise the massive long-term and transformational benefits that the Casement Park project will bring. It is also hugely disappointing to anyone who believed that the new British Government might have adopted a different approach from the austerity and cuts of their Tory predecessors. The Secretary of State, Hilary Benn, said clearly that Casement Park will be built. I urge him and his Government to honour the commitments that they have made.

We will continue to work with the GAA, the local Executive and the Irish and British Governments to push the project forward, build state-of-the-art facilities and deliver a first-class stadium for Gaelic games. We might have missed the Euros, but, clearly, the rewards are still massive when it comes to creating jobs, increasing tourism and having a sporting facility that represents a vote of confidence in this generation and future generations.

I pass Casement every day on my way home in Andytown. As someone who had the honour of playing in Casement and who now has the honour of representing the people of West Belfast, I know that it will have a hugely positive sporting and cultural legacy for generations to come. I certainly will not give up on that. We will not give up on that. Yes, we have been delayed, but I assure everyone inside and outside the Chamber that we will not be denied and that Casement will be built.

**Mr Gaston:** I welcome the news that His Majesty's Government have finally called time on the much-sought-after fairy tale that is building Casement in time for the Euros. This is a project that was ill-conceived from day 1, with huge opposition from local residents, which resulted in years of delay. The project lost the run of itself, and, in recent years, the estimated cost of the build also lost the run of itself at £400 million, which would have dwarfed the money awarded to other sports. This would have then led to a festering within the unionist community that it had been taken by the hand. We constantly hear from the Executive and Westminster that pressures exist on the public finances. It would have been madness to have committed £400 million to fund the cash cow of the GAA. Having repeatedly refused to put more than a mere £15 million towards the project, the GAA, in many ways, has only itself to blame.

There are others who have not covered themselves in glory either in this saga. Chief among them are the top brass in the IFA, who refused to listen to fans and instead backed the Casement project, even when the chants of opposition were echoing around Windsor Park. Then, of course, we have the DUP, which just last week sought to tell us that the Programme for Government, which committed it to make progress on Casement, was wonderful. I say this to Minister Lyons: it is time to find reverse gear on this issue and listen to the unionist people who entrusted you with their votes and their transfers. Yes, the GAA deserves its fair share. I am not disputing that, but the fair share

must be measured against the money that has gone to other sports such as football and rugby. Unless and until the GAA cleans up its act regarding the naming of cups and grounds after terrorists — I think of Thomas McElwee as an example — it should not be taken by the hand and treated as having priority for public funds. Now it is not the time to double down on planning and building Casement but the time to reassess it. I certainly would not want to be known as the unionist Minister who built Casement for the GAA.

**Mr Kingston:** One clear consequence of the announcement on Friday is that we can now separate the two issues of the legacy for football from the 2028 Euros and the rebuilding of Casement Park, following the 2011 agreement for the three stadia for football, rugby and Gaelic games. Both matters need their own focused attention. On the 2028 Euros, it is important that there is a renewed focus on what will be the involvement and benefit for football in Northern Ireland. If we are not to host tournament games, can we host national teams during part or all of the tournament? Can we host teams for pre-tournament training camps, including friendly games? What facilities do we need to have in place? Can the national training centre be completed in time? What are the plans for the future development and expansion of Windsor Park? In particular, what plans exist for the replacement or updating of the north stand? What will be the legacy for football in Northern Ireland from the UK and Ireland hosting this prestigious tournament?

Northern Ireland has a growing track record of and reputation for hosting major sports tournaments, including, in football, the men's under-19 Euros this summer and, previously, the under-19 women's tournament and the Super Cup final. As a member of the Communities Committee, I am keen to engage with the IFA, the various levels of government, football fans, football clubs and all other relevant bodies to ensure that there is tangible benefit for the sport of football in our sharing of the hosting of this prestigious tournament.

**Mr Honeyford:** It is the start of Good Relations Week, and this is a massive missed opportunity on which we will look back with regret. I have heard Members here talk about the missed opportunity of the Maze/Long Kesh site, and that stadium should have been built. The same people were saying back then that we cannot have that either.

In 2028, it will be the 30th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. The 25th anniversary

was embarrassing enough, when the President of the United States of America came here to try to bring an economic boost to Northern Ireland. At the time, the Assembly was being prevented from doing its job and was not sitting. We did not have the president here for long, only for a morning.

When we come to the 30th anniversary, the world's cameras will be on the UK and Ireland, and — guess what? — we will not be there then either. It is absolutely pathetic. I listened to the Member behind me speak. His vision for the future has been mooted in various quarters. It is Groundhog Day. We already know what that vision for the future is: it is the past that we have already lived through. It is neither pretty nor inspiring, and there is absolutely no future in it. It is the past.

Here was an opportunity here to break down divisions. I started by saying that it is Good Relations Week. Alliance will always stand up for reconciliation, for a shared society and for moving forward together. Here was an opportunity to bring the community together and to do more than any Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) programme or any other community programme could ever do to put sport, which is leading the way in all of this, right at its heart and bring people into west Belfast. People from west Belfast accepting Northern Ireland fans into west Belfast would do more for community relations and for breaking down barriers than anything that we could ever legislate for.

Sport is leading the way. I have just left the launch of the Ulster Rugby Foundation, which I was hosting. Sport brings together the community and people from every background, including people with special needs and those involved in female sport. It is leading the way, while we are falling behind.

If the vision and direction in the Chamber is to celebrate not getting something, that is just mind-blowing. For our economy, it is an embarrassment on the world stage. People who were hoping to invest here will have just seen that we are not that interested. We cannot be that interested in trying to convince people to open up here if we cannot even do it for ourselves. I just do not know.

To release a statement on a Friday at 7.10 pm is disgraceful. I also put it on the record, however, that the IFA and Ulster GAA —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Honeyford:** — should be congratulated.

**Lord Elliott:** I thank the Member for raising the matter. I have heard very few people say that Casement Park should not be redeveloped. I am not saying that. What I am saying is that it should be developed on the basis that it was to be developed, but let me be blunt and fair: there is no endless pot of money to redevelop it on the basis that was being suggested.

A number of figures have been mooted, but I do not know about their accuracy. The cost could be over £400 million or under £400 million, but, whatever it is, the figure is substantial. I am significantly concerned about the reliance that there was on hosting the Euros at Casement Park. I have to put on the record my concern about why we did not try to improve Windsor Park to a level at which it could have hosted the Euros, instead of relying on the development of Casement Park, which was always running behind.

I do not believe that people here are shouting that it is a great decision not to put in the money. Rather, they are saying that it is a good decision not to target the money at that particular project when there are other projects that are more in need. Yes, Casement Park needs to be redeveloped, and I accept that. I do not hear many others saying that it should not be, but there are priorities in this country that we need to target money at more than we do at building a state-of-the-art Casement Park that, outside of the Euros, will be used solely for the benefit of the GAA. Whether that is for GAA matches, concerts or other events, the GAA will get the revenue from it. We therefore have to be realistic about how we take forward the issue.

There are opportunities to develop Casement Park in line with what the GAA and, hopefully, local residents want, because those residents have not been overly impressed up to now with the plans for the multipurpose stadium. I would be more sympathetic to a better project if the GAA were to tidy up its act.

The GAA does a lot of good work in the sporting fraternity, but there are cultural, constitutional and political elements to it. That is accepted by senior people in the GAA. If you read some of Brian McAvoy's statements, you will see that he accepts that it is not just about the sporting element. The rules dictate that, if you are a unionist, you cannot be a member of the GAA, because it is strictly an all-Ireland-based organisation. Read the rules: they speak for themselves.

**12.15 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr McNulty:** This is a sad, sad day for Gaels across the island. The developments over the weekend have compounded 13 years of frustration for those of us who believe in the potential for the redevelopment of Casement Park to be a huge win for Gaelic games, for those of us who treasure the power of sport and for the community in west Belfast. There was a huge opportunity to host a global sporting event in the heart of west Belfast with a spin-off economic, cultural, community and sporting multiplier effect that would have happened as a consequence.

The last match played at the park was over a decade ago, in 2013. Frankly, there should be an apology to the generation of footballers, camogie players and hurlers who have missed their chance to step on to the hallowed turf of Casement Park and play for their club, their county, their country, their community and their friends and family. It is a desperately disappointing and sad state of affairs.

I welcome the participation of all parties, particularly Executive parties, in the discussions today and would welcome answers to the serious questions that Gaels now have. It is not just about broken promises; it is much deeper than that. It is about more than the GAA or the Euros; it is about equality and fairness. The GAA runs through people like the letters through a stick of rock. It is core to almost 50% of us in this place and to who we are. When did Executive Ministers first know of the announcement? When did they know that it was coming, and what representations did they make to the British Government? What commitments had they sought? Why were the tender documents not issued in March when they were ready to go? What commitments have Ministers sought and secured on the financial commitment to Casement Park and the timeline for delivery?

I find it startling — startling — that a junior Minister has been sent out on the issue. Who has been leading on this in the Executive? Is it an Executive project? Is DFC or the Executive responsible, or has the issue been farmed out by the Executive and the First Ministers? The First Minister has been definitive that Casement Park will be built: can Executive parties outline what will be built and when? What will the Executive do to build the broken relationships between Gaels across the island and this Government? Trust is in tatters. With respect to the junior Minister who tabled the Matter of the

Day, why are Ministers not here to answer questions? There are plenty of questions to be asked, but no one is here to answer them. Why?

This is a failure of government at virtually every level. Casement Park was never a UEFA project: it has been an Executive commitment for more than a decade. The collapse of government on two occasions for more than five years has had a catastrophic impact on delivering this showcase project. We must provide hope to Gaels in Antrim. We must provide hope to Gaels in Ireland and to the people of west Belfast.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr McNulty:** Casement Park must be built.

**Mr Brett:** There are two clear issues before the House this afternoon: the fact that Northern Ireland will not host any of the games in the 2028 tournament and the redevelopment of Casement Park. They are distinct and separate issues, and I will deal with both.

First, for a proud supporter of our national football team, it should have been the stuff of dreams for the Northern Ireland national team to play games in the European Championships in Belfast. As I made clear at the time publicly and privately to the IFA, the way to achieve that was to deliver a football tournament at a football stadium. Instead, the IFA decided to embark on the process that it did, and we have ended up in a situation where not a single game — not a single game — across these islands will be played in Belfast. There are serious questions for the IFA as to why there was no plan B. There are serious questions for the IFA as to why we will, hopefully, cheer on the Northern Ireland football team in Dublin, Edinburgh, Wales and in a final in London but not in Belfast.

My party has been clear on Casement Park. It was a DUP Minister who announced a funding package in 2011 that fairly and equitably treated all three sporting codes in Northern Ireland. We stand over the commitment that we made then. We do not renege on that, and we do not expect others to renege on that and try to promote or lift one sporting organisation above another. In this place, we move forward together when everyone is treated fairly and equitably.

I will point out the reason that Casement Park has not been built. The fault does not lie on these Benches. It was not a DUP Culture, Arts

and Leisure Minister who was forced before the then Committee for trying to bury a report that related to safety concerns. It was not the DUP branch on the Andersonstown Road that brought the issue to the High Court. Some of those shouting loudest about why Casement Park has not been built would do better to look at their own backyard.

**Mr O'Toole:** The failure to build Casement Park in time for the European Championships is a vast and indefensible failure of the people of west Belfast and of everyone in this city and region and the entire island of Ireland. It would have been, by any margin, the most globally significant sporting event ever to take place in this region. There are multiple levels of failure. Number one is the UK Government's failure to properly deliver on promises made. Their preposterous rushing out of the press release on a Friday night is indefensible. Number two is the years of contradictory statements and lack of clear prioritisation from Executive Ministers. Yes, as my colleague said, collapsing the institutions for five years — half of the past decade — meant that decisions could not properly be made. I acknowledge that two SDLP Ministers progressed the project, including Nichola Mallon, who gave it planning permission in 2021 *[Interruption.]* That is true: she did.

I also want to reflect on some of the, frankly, tragic statements from the unionist Benches today. I was one of the first people in the Chamber to talk about the possibility of bringing the Euros to Belfast. I wanted to see the economic impact on the west of Belfast and the whole city; it really would have been transformational. I know that Gaels in Ulster want to see Casement Park built, but let us be clear: the massive multiplier of having the European Championships would have been incomparable in terms of economic output. However, unionism today has stood up and repeatedly said, effectively, that it did not want to see the European Championships hosted *[Interruption]* at Casement Park. I have heard multiple Members say that they did not want to see Casement Park host the European Championships. That is the upshot. The truth is that there was no way to get Windsor Park up to spec in time for the European Championships. I am more than happy for the Member to explain to me at some point in the Chamber or elsewhere the realistic way to get Windsor Park up to spec, but I have heard no serious proposals. The only way to bring the European Championships here, to get that transformational football tournament here, was to build Casement Park.



Like Mr Honeyford, I wanted to see the transformational community impact of having Northern Ireland fans walk or get the train to Casement Park in the year of the 30th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. That, as well as the economic impact, would have been symbolic and hugely important. It is a tragedy that it will not happen. It is a profound, multi-level failure, but, what we need to understand now from the British Government, Executive Ministers and all interested parties is when Casement Park will be built, even if, sadly, we will not have the European Championships. We cannot have siren voices from certain Benches stop the project happening now. It needs to be built, but Executive Ministers and the British Government need to tell us when and how.

**Mr Buckley:** There are many reasons why Casement Park has not been redeveloped, many of which have been outlined in the House today, but there are two parts to it. Like Lord Elliott, I am not against the redevelopment of Casement Park in line with adequate and fair funding, as was announced in 2011 for all the sporting codes. That landmark decision could have transformed sports in Northern Ireland.

I will raise two points.

The first is the cost. A £400 million price tag has been put on the decision as to whether Casement Park should be redeveloped. I see Mr Honeyford shaking his head, but I honestly think that sometimes the House loses the run of itself and Members do not understand the priorities of people today. You may think that £400 million for the redevelopment of a sports stadium would be a great thing for Northern Ireland and would deliver tangible outcomes as a concert venue and sporting facility, but people's funding priorities are, to just name a few, waiting lists, childcare, special educational needs provision and pensioners' fuel payments. Mr Honeyford, I heard your passionate plea about the visions and priorities of the Alliance Party. Your Minister in the Department of Justice recently signed off spend of £13.3 million on a canteen at Magilligan prison, so do not come to the House and wax lyrical about where and how money should be spent appropriately. Look in your own backyard.

I will also not allow the narrative that the GAA is the poor man's cousin to be perpetuated in the Chamber. The GAA has a yearly income revenue of over £100 million. I am not against the redevelopment of Casement Park. I am not against a fair and equitable settlement from this place, as was committed to, but it must be done on a fair and equitable basis.

The Member who made the statement, Miss Reilly, mentioned building a state-of-the-art facility for Gaelic games. That, indeed, is the point. The Euros will have a legacy for football, which I would like to be redevelopment and an energy in our grassroots football fraternity in Northern Ireland for all communities.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Buckley:** They should be adequately provided for.

## Members' Statements

### Water Quality: South Derry

**Ms Sheerin:** I rise to raise an issue that has been brought to me by hundreds of my constituents over the past fortnight. Some of the words that have been used to describe our tap water in south Derry include "musty", "very stale", "not drinkable", "rotten", "rank", "it tastes like dirt" and "it tastes like blue mould". I have not had to rely on the words of my constituents to tell me what the water is like because when I turn on a tap in my house, I can see, smell and taste it for myself.

Over the past fortnight, I have been in constant contact with NI Water about the situation. I have contacted NI Water on an almost hourly basis, reflecting the requests, concerns and worries of my constituents. I accept its assurances that the water is safe to drink, but the fact and reality of the situation is that the water is not drinkable. The problem is not one of recent making; it is the result of decades of underinvestment, and it is a good reflection of the importance of the prioritisation of the AERA Minister's action plan for Lough Neagh and the fact that we all need to work together to solve the current crisis at Lough Neagh.

I call upon NI Water to act as urgently as it can on the requests of my constituents. Different constituents have reflected to me that their requests for individual water testing have not been met as promised. I put to the House how seriously we feel about this crisis because water is a basic human right. When we make a cup of tea, we expect it to taste like tea and not like blue mould.

### City and Growth Deals

**Mr Middleton:** I want to raise the issue of the city deal funding for Northern Ireland. When the city deals were first put on the agenda for Northern Ireland, they brought a huge amount of optimism and excitement about the opportunities that they would bring to each of our communities across Northern Ireland.

If delivered, the funding will not only strengthen our economy but improve the quality of life of the people whom we represent. The deals will create thousands of jobs and revitalise our cities and regions whilst promoting growth and innovation, infrastructure and skills. The funding package is worth more than £1.5 billion and represents a commitment to Northern Ireland's long-term success.

12.30 pm

On Friday afternoon, I, like many people, was deeply disappointed and angered at the announcement that the city deal packages across Northern Ireland were to be paused. That information filtered out, with many of us finding out through social media. Our councils found out in the same manner. The announcement of the pause alone caused significant anger and frustration, not least in my constituency of Foyle, where a financial deal is to be signed on Wednesday — in just two days' time. Invitees were informed by the council that the event was cancelled, only to receive a further email over the weekend to say that it was back on, following a tweet by the Secretary of State. That is a shameful way for the Labour Government to treat those who have put so much effort into getting the projects to the point and state of readiness. Whilst I welcome the clarification that the Belfast region city deal and the Londonderry and Strabane deal are to proceed, it remains deeply concerning that the same clarification has not been provided to Causeway Coast and Glens and Mid South West.

The city that I represent is set to benefit from a package worth around £300 million. That is for projects such as the establishment of the maritime museum in Ebrington; the regeneration of our riverfront, Strand Road and Walled City areas; and the establishment of further projects in Magee university. I appreciate that each of the deals across Northern Ireland are at different stages, but to pause them is an act of bad faith. It is important that the Executive and Assembly stand united in urging the Labour Government to deliver on the city deals and to work at pace with partners across Northern Ireland to see progress as soon as possible.

### PEG Tube Surgery: Waiting List

**Miss McAllister:** I rise to talk about an issue that, I am sure, many in the Chamber have been in touch with constituents about: the paediatric percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy (PEG) tube surgery waiting list. There is a small group of parents and carers across Northern Ireland — I believe that the number is sitting at 93 — whose children are waiting for PEG tube surgery. For context, that is surgery to insert a feeding tube through the abdomen. Currently, the majority of those children have a feeding tube through their nose. Unfortunately, the parents of those children find themselves having to visit their local GP, be

visited by the community children's nursing teams or even be trained themselves to reinsert the tubes, because, for various reasons, they often come out. There are long-term and short-term effects of the use of nasal feeding tubes, such as the displacement of the tube, vomiting, coughing, loss of appetite and even pain and discomfort. As a parent, I never want to see my child in pain or discomfort.

Some of those families and one in particular have been waiting for over three years for the surgery. Given that the list is definitive — there are 93 children on it — we must hear from the Health Minister on what plans there are to ensure that those children can be seen as soon as possible. We understand the resourcing issues, but, when we are dealing with such a specific and narrow group of young people in Northern Ireland, there must be plans in place. We have engaged with the Royal College of Surgeons and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. They have been more than eager to work with the Minister to come up with plans to tackle the waiting list, particularly when it comes to possibly transferring children to Alder Hey Children's Hospital in Liverpool.

We all know people across Northern Ireland who are on a waiting list, and, indeed, some of us are waiting. However, when it comes to children being on a waiting list for issues that cause pain and discomfort, we can understand the frustration that those parents feel. I stand with them when they lobby the Minister and the Belfast Trust to ensure that they are expedited through the process in a way that, of course, meets clinical need and ensures that they can get the right treatment for their children. I hope that all Members will join in making sure that everyone works together and puts pressure on to ensure that all 93 of those young people can get the surgery that they need as soon as possible.

## Devenish College

**Lord Elliott:** Devenish College is a new school that was built quite recently in Enniskillen. It is a fabulous facility for all the pupils in the area. The school's pupil numbers have increased as have the number of those who wish to get into the school. There is an issue around the traffic outside the school, as there is a 50 mph speed limit on the road. There have been unsuccessful attempts to get that reduced to 40 mph.

There are schools in the area and throughout Northern Ireland that have a 20 mph speed limit at certain times, when pupils are going in

between 8.30 am and 9.30 am or coming out of the school for an hour in the evening. That would greatly enhance safety in that area for pupils, parents and teachers coming and going from the school at those times. I ask the Department for Infrastructure to look at that in the near future, because it is important that those people feel safe going in and out of that school, particularly the pupils now that there are such significant numbers. Given that the 20 mph speed limit has been introduced at other schools in the area, it would be appropriate for Devenish College, which has well over 600 pupils coming and going daily.

## City and Growth Deals

**Ms McLaughlin:** I, too, want to discuss the Friday fiasco in relation to the pausing of the city deals. The issue has concerned everyone in the Chamber as well as people across Northern Ireland. When the news emerged on Friday that funding for city deals had been paused, it was a gut-punch to many of us. That funding was hard fought for and was hard won over many years. The SDLP pioneered the concept of city deals when others dismissed their importance. The idea that the funding could be ripped away from our deal in Derry or from that in any part of Northern Ireland was as shocking as it was unacceptable.

It was particularly galling that the funding was paused just days before the deal was due to be signed this Wednesday in the Guildhall, threatening to rob our city and region of a huge opportunity and clutching defeat from the jaws of victory. Of course, in Derry, it is of central importance, given that the funding is part of the necessary financial investment that will guarantee the long-overdue expansion of higher education in our city, if we are to reach 10,000 students.

I am deeply concerned that the Executive were informed of this on Wednesday but chose to sit on the news until Friday afternoon. Anyone could have seen that saving the funding would require intense lobbying by those with influence as soon as possible. In Westminster, Colum Eastwood engaged with senior British Government Ministers in the Treasury to secure that funding, and I am pleased that we were able to ensure that it was secured within 24 hours.

That is only the start, however. As we stand, two of our city deals — Mid South West and Causeway Coast and Glens — are still at risk. That level of uncertainty is just not good enough. Such significant investment facing

undue delays and disruption is counterproductive and extremely damaging. We are among the most deprived areas anywhere in the UK, and the city deals have transformational potential. We cannot afford to give up the opportunity for anywhere across the North, not least at the last possible hour. The city deals need to be delivered at pace, and we must ensure that that happens.

## **Newry Early Years Children and Family Centre: Closure**

**Ms Kimmins:** I rise to urgently highlight the recent news of the worrying closure of Newry Early Years Children and Family Centre at Orana House. The news has been a massive blow for many families in my constituency, who have described the services as a lifeline for them and their children. The closure comes as a result of the current lease coming to an end. Unfortunately, to date, despite many months of effort, no alternative premises have been found, and that is having a hugely detrimental impact on the children and families concerned.

The Early Years centre has been at Orana House for many years, providing vital support to thousands of families — parents, carers and children — throughout that time. Support for children of preschool age is particularly critical for their learning and development and even more so for children with additional needs, who will benefit immensely from tailored support at the earliest possible stage. As many will know, support services for children and young people with additional needs are extremely stretched, so the further reduction in services will have a significant impact on many families. Parents have told me that Newry Early Years is the only place where their child can be themselves as they have amazing key workers who can meet their needs and provide the care and attention that they need to help them to grow and develop.

Families have been left feeling extremely anxious as a result of the news. It is essential that a solution is found urgently so that our children are not failed and get equal access to the support that they need that many others are getting across the North. I implore the Education and Health Ministers to work with Early Years and the Southern Trust to find suitable premises urgently and to find solutions for those children and families, not just in the here and now but for the future.

## **City and Growth Deals**

**Mrs Erskine:** Like many in the Chamber on Friday, I was incandescent with anger at the Government's decision to pause city and growth deals in Northern Ireland, which were secured by the DUP in the confidence-and-supply agreement. The Government have acted in bad faith and have poured cold water on projects that provide a fire in the belly of our local economy.

My council area falls under the Mid South West growth deal, which represents the largest investment outside Belfast, of £252 million across Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council and Mid Ulster District Council. It is wrong to say that the growth deal was not at an advanced stage. I understand that those councils were due to sign the heads of terms on 16 October.

What now for my area? The A4 Enniskillen southern bypass, talked about for 47 years, could be in jeopardy. That much-needed infrastructure project had just been announced to go to the second stage of the procurement process on 5 September. Other government infrastructure documents had the A4 bypass referenced in their plans. In an area that has been ruled out of other infrastructure plans, that is a real blow.

Not only was that to be delivered, but tourism projects, such as £10.5 million for Cuilcagh Lakelands Geopark; a local company that was to lead on a green hydrogen distribution network, a game-changer for energy representing £24.7 million; a construction innovation excellence centre of £7 million; support to the agri-food industry with investment in the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE); and a £36 million project on industrial lands that would have been a real support to the manufacturing hub of mid-Ulster due to a chronic shortage of land for expansion — all left with a question mark hanging over them.

The Mid South West growth deal was not just some fine words on a page; it was to be a regional economic catalyst. Through the Government's shambolic handling of the news at the weekend, we now have ever-widening gaps in equality and regional balance. Each part of Northern Ireland was promised investment, and each part of Northern Ireland deserves it. I will be making that point to the Secretary of State, and I will not be idle in fighting to ensure that the Mid South West growth deal goes ahead.

## Carrick Academy and Carrickfergus Grammar School Hockey Pitch

**Mr Donnelly:** We all know that being able to access leisure facilities to exercise and take part in sporting activities has huge benefits for mental and physical health and general well-being. That is especially important for young people as sport can help to create friendships, grow self-confidence and tackle loneliness and social isolation. These days, when many children reach for their screens, we should provide high-quality sports facilities to encourage them to get out and play. Just this summer, we saw inspirational performances from local athletes at the Olympic and Paralympic Games, and we know that Northern Ireland can deliver on the international sporting stage.

Sadly, it is the case that many school and community facilities are in disrepair and are ageing, with no obvious solutions. Last week, I was contacted about such a pitch in east Antrim. It is a large shale playing surface that is used for sports such as hockey and athletics, shared between two local schools: Carrick Academy and Carrickfergus Grammar School. It is also used by the local community. Unfortunately, the quality of the pitch, which has been the main playing surface for decades, has deteriorated badly over the years despite recent repairs, and now, due to health and safety concerns, it is completely unusable for competitive sports, meaning that hockey games have been cancelled.

That is clearly very disappointing for the teams and young people involved.

### 12.45 pm

Shale pitches are not very common any more, and it is not hard to see why. The surface is covered with small stones like sand, and, in fact, it is more akin to walking on a beach than on a sports playing surface. It is for this reason — to prevent injuries to the players — that the schools had to pull the use of this pitch. I know that this is far from the only issue affecting school estates, even school estates in east Antrim, and I know of schools that have areas closed off to students, but I am asking that the Education Authority come and visit the school with me to see the state of the pitch and whether anything can be done to reinstate it and make it safe for people to play and run on.

Schemes where schools and communities can share resources are a great idea, but, in this case, attention is needed. There needs to be a

usable solution that provides long-term, high-quality surfaces where young people's teams and members of the community can use pitches for exercise and competitions.

## Lá Idirnáisiúnta an Daonlathais

**Mr Sheehan:** Rinneadh Lá Idirnáisiúnta an Daonlathais a cheiliúradh inné.

Tá feidhm rithábhachtach ag an aos óg sa daonlathas a chur chun cinn. Ní mór dúinne, mar pholaiteoirí, bheith ag éisteacht leis an mhuintir óga, nó is iadsan a bheas thíos, nó thuas, leis na dlíthe a dhéanamidne inniu. Caithfear a chinntiú go mbeidh tuairimí na chéad ghlúine eile i gcroílár na ndlíthe a rithimid inniu. Má chítear don aos óg go dtugann polaiteoirí cluas le héisteacht dóibh agus go bhfuil meas ag lucht déanta beartas ar a dtuairimí, is amhlaidh is mó páirt a ghlacfaidh siad i bpróiseas an daonlathais. Mar sin de, molaim go hard an obair fhiúntach atá Tionól na nÓg a dhéanamh anseo. Tugann sí seans do dhaoine óga tuiscint is fearr a fháil ar na hinstitiúidí seo againn.

Is iomaí masla agus anró a thugtar don daonlathas ar na saolta seo, idir an mhífhaisnéis agus an bhréagaisnéis ar líne, agus an pobalachas atá ag éirí níos coitianta i rith an ama ar fud an domhain. Cuireann an mhífhaisnéis gangaid agus goimh sa phlé polaitíochta, cuireann sí pobail in adharca a chéile agus cuireann sí amhras ar dhaoine faoi institiúidí daonlathacha. Dá mhéad daoine óga atá rannpháirteach sa daonlathas, is amhlaidh is mó guthanna a bheas ann leis an mhífhaisnéis úd a bhréagnú.

Caithfimid an chéad ghlúin eile a spreagadh le bheith páirteach sa daonlathas. Déanaimid sin trí thionscadail amhail Tionól na nÓg, trí chluas le héisteacht a thabhairt don aos óg agus trína léiriú dóibh go bhfuilimid ag déanamh beart de réir a mbriathair.

## International Day of Democracy

*[Translation: The International Day of Democracy was celebrated yesterday.]*

*Youth play a vital role in promoting democracy. We, as politicians, must listen to young people, as they will be the ones who will benefit or will bear the brunt of the laws that we make today. We need to ensure that the views of the next generation are at the heart of the laws that we pass today.*

*If young people feel that politicians listen to them and that policymakers value their views, they will participate all the more in the democratic process. Therefore, I commend the great work that the Youth Assembly does here. It gives young people the chance to get a better understanding of our institutions.*

*Democracy suffers many slights and attacks these days, from misinformation and disinformation online, to the populism that is on the rise across the world. Misinformation poisons our political discourse, it puts communities at odds with each other and makes people doubt democratic institutions. The more young people who participate in democracy, the more voices there will be to refute that misinformation.*

*We need to encourage the next generation to get involved in democracy. We do this through projects such as the Youth Assembly, by listening to young people and by showing them that we fit our actions to their words.]*

## Gender-based Violence

**Ms Sugden:** I hope that today is a significant day for women and girls — for women and girls who are victims of abuse, violence and femicide and for women and girls who inevitably will be victims of abuse, violence and femicide.

It is a shameful indictment of our society that we all anticipate the next news story where a woman has been murdered by a man. We continue to have one of the highest rates of femicide in Europe. As a region of the United Kingdom, we have a rate higher than the national average. Last year, more than 33,186 domestic abuse incidents were recorded by the PSNI. That is one every 16 minutes. By lunchtime today, four more victims will have reported abuse to the police. It is a slight increase on the previous year, but it is certainly not going down and does not take into account incidents that go unreported due to lack of confidence in the criminal justice system.

I pay tribute to Rachel Simpson, the third woman to be murdered in Northern Ireland within four weeks, after the horrific murder of Montserrat Martorell in late August — the twenty-second and twenty-third women since January 2020. That figure should be alarming, and it should motivate each of us, as women, as men, as mothers, as fathers — as human beings — to genuinely want to address the issue of gender-based violence in Northern Ireland. That begins with hard truths, with calling it out for what it is and with recognising

that we are not doing enough to prevent anyone from becoming a victim in this way.

It is not all men, but, when it happens, it usually is a man. Indeed, men are victims too, but, again, their perpetrator is usually a man. Yesterday, a young man of 21 was charged with murder — 21. What has happened in the lives of perpetrators that violence and murder comes too easily? They are not born bad. They grow up — barely grow up — to be aggressive, to abuse, to assault and to murder. They ruin other lives as well as their own.

There has to be a better way: one that recognises that it is a wider societal problem. It begins with tackling misogyny in boardrooms, on group chats and in classrooms. There needs to be a recognition that we do not encourage healthy relationships without there being age-appropriate relationships and sexuality education (RSE) and that, despite being a post-conflict society, we have never dealt with the trauma of our past, which is then passed on to the next generations.

I welcome the Executive strategy that will be launched later today. It will not stop the abuse overnight or lives from being taken, but I hope that, at a minimum, it begins a new and honest conversation, leading to action, about a crisis that women and girls have lived with, and died for, for far too long.

## Pat Finucane Inquiry

**Mr Buckley:** Another week in Labour la-la land. Another episode of 'Carry On Keir'. I thought that we were told that 'Things Can Only Get Better'. That tells me much about a Prime Minister who is more concerned about which donor will buy his latest designer suit or glasses than about dealing with the pressing priorities that people across the country face.

Just last week, on Saturday, 800 illegal immigrants crossed the English Channel. Sadly, eight of them lost their life. Just last week, there was a vote in Parliament on the Labour Government's decision to cut winter fuel payments for 10 million pensioners. The very next day, whilst pensioners fear for the winter, the Labour Government announced £600 million in additional funds to fight the war in Ukraine. Just last week, Sir Keir Starmer released 2,000 prisoners from our jails, with one being arrested and detained on the very same day, following a sexual assault. To me, this does not seem to be a Prime Minister who is in touch with the issues affecting citizens every day.

There is a two-tier approach to victims being taken. Just last week, the Government announced a public inquiry into the murder of Pat Finucane. Every family that suffered during the Troubles has a right to access justice, but I cannot but say that there has been a two-tier approach taken to addressing the carnage, brutality and barbarity of the acts carried out by the republican movement. I think of Alan Black, a friend who was shot 18 times on a roadside in Kingsmills. Ten of his colleagues were killed in the most brutal sectarian act of our Troubles. Sinn Féin members refused to take part in the recent inquest. Alan Black is not the only example. There are countless people out there who are crying out for justice, but whom do the Government seek to protect? I cannot but draw the conclusion that it is an attempt to spare the blushes of an Irish Government that refuse to cooperate or, indeed, those in the Sinn Féin ranks who continually conceal information about what they know to have happened in the murderous past.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

### **Programme for Government: Peace**

**Ms Bradshaw:** As we mark the beginning of Good Relations Week 2024, I make the case for including a mission on "Peace" and peacebuilding in the Executive's Programme for Government (PFG). Like many in the Chamber, I welcomed last week's launch of the draft Programme for Government for consultation. My party's Ministers have been working hard around the Executive table to progress the PFG. Alliance wanted to see "Peace" and peacebuilding as a separate mission in the PFG from the outset. We proceeded on the basis that it would be included as a cross-cutting theme, with the option of a dedicated mission on "Peace" forming a specific part of the public consultation. I hope that Members will agree that the case for its inclusion could not be clearer. Without embedding reconciliation, diversity, equality and inclusion in everything that we do, we cannot achieve so many of the priorities and ambitions that are set out in the document.

To begin with, the draft PFG includes ambitious proposals for growing a globally competitive economy in Northern Ireland, but we know that civil unrest, paramilitarism and political upheaval are major barriers to economic growth. Time and again, research has shown that political stability is a driver of foreign direct investment and the shared prosperity and job creation that come with it. We will never build

the thriving economy that we want in an environment that is defined by stop-start government and political chaos.

Elsewhere, the draft PFG, rightly, targets the long-overdue transformation of Northern Ireland's public services, but we have to acknowledge that that is not possible without tackling the cost of the division that remains so deeply embedded across our society. The duplication and segregation of the likes of health services, housing and schools mean that those services cost a fortune to maintain. That is a fortune that the Executive can ill afford, the spending of which robs those services of desperately needed funding and investment. That also stops us from creating the high-quality, integrated and inclusive public services for which our constituents have been crying out for so long.

Whether it is growing the economy, creating safer communities, improving public services, tackling poverty or supporting the vulnerable, none of the PFG goals will become a reality without "Peace" and peacebuilding being at the heart of the Executive's agenda. Alliance will continue to make the case for that vital mission in the time ahead, and I hope that other parties will support us in our effort.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Diane Dodds. You have two minutes, Mrs Dodds.

### **Public Inquiries**

**Mrs Dodds:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Thirty years of terrorism and evil perpetrated by paramilitaries in Northern Ireland have left a shocking legacy of pain and tears. Last week, the Government's actions of granting a public inquiry into only one death and citing the "exceptional" issues in that case perpetuated that legacy. Today, we should think of those for whom there is not the truth or justice that should be the hallmarks of a democratic society. The Government's hypocrisy and double standards were reflected in the actions of the Irish Government when, last week, they welcomed the inquiry into one evil act but did not acknowledge the collusion between the Provisional IRA and the gardaí.

I make no apology for again raising the case of Ian Sproule. He was a young loyalist from Killen, near Castleterragh. He was 23 years of age when, on 13 April 1991, gunmen lay waiting for him. They fired 41 bullets into his car. Shortly after that, his father received a phone call from the Provisional IRA telling him to go out to the yard and see the mess that they had left for him

— it was his son. There are significant reasons to believe that the gardaí officers in Donegal passed erroneous information on Ian Sproule to the Provisional IRA. I have been involved with the case for many years. Along with John Sproule, I met the Irish Government in relation to the case, and there has been a blank refusal to carry out an investigation. The Irish Government should come off the fence —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mrs Dodds:** — and stop the double-talk and the gaslighting of innocent victims in Northern Ireland.

## Assembly Business

### Public Petition: 24/7 Thrombectomy Service

**Mr Speaker:** Paula Bradshaw has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member has up to three minutes in which to speak.

**Ms Bradshaw:** As the chairperson of the all-party group on stroke, I am delighted to present this petition calling for 24/7 access to thrombectomy services. The petition was organised by the Stroke Association and has been signed by 3,567 people, including stroke survivors who have benefited from a thrombectomy. I am delighted to welcome some of them to the Public Gallery. They have come to see the petition being presented, and I thank them for their efforts.

A thrombectomy is a mechanical procedure that is carried out on eligible stroke survivors in a timely manner. It saves brains and significantly reduces the chance of disabilities such as paralysis, visual impairment and communication difficulties following a stroke. It saves money: on average, each patient who receives a thrombectomy saves the health service £47,000 over five years. It changes lives: a quarter of patients who receive a thrombectomy experience reduced disability, and a fifth achieve functional independence. Thanks to the efforts of hard-working stroke teams, Northern Ireland has a relatively well-developed thrombectomy service compared with the rest of the UK. However, with only 6.7% of patients receiving a thrombectomy, we still fall short of ensuring that every eligible patient — thought to be at least 10% of stroke patients — can benefit from this life-changing treatment.

#### 1.00 pm

One way to enhance access to a thrombectomy is by providing a 24/7 service so that patients can access it no matter when or where they have a stroke. The Department of Health previously committed to delivering a 24/7 service for Northern Ireland by the end of 2024, but it now says that that is unlikely to happen. This is unacceptable and will lead to more serious disabilities and, unfortunately, death in some cases.

I urge fellow MLAs to work with me, the Stroke Association and the community support groups to lobby the Department of Health to commit to thrombectomy expansion, with multi-year



investment in infrastructure, equipment and workforce training and support to tackle stroke workforce shortages by progressing the promised stroke workforce plan for Northern Ireland; to progress stroke transformation to create efficient treatment pathways so that eligible patients can access a thrombectomy as quickly as possible; and to invest in innovations that can support enhanced and timely access to a thrombectomy.

Members, now is the time to make thrombectomy treatment for stroke patients a priority. Failing to do so will have devastating consequences for so many lives. Thank you.

*Ms Bradshaw moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.*

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

## Committee Business

### Committee Membership

*Resolved:*

*That Mr Peter Martin replace Ms Cheryl Brownlee as a member of the Committee for Education; that Mr Jonathan Buckley replace Mr Stephen Dunne as a member of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee; and that Mr Stephen Dunne be appointed as a member of the Committee for Justice. — [Mr Clarke.]*

**Mr Speaker:** I ask Members to take their ease while we change the Chair. We will then move to a statement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

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

## Ministerial Statements

### Ending Violence against Women and Girls Strategic Framework and First Delivery Plan

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** The Speaker has received notice from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement. Before I call the First Minister, I remind Members that they must be concise in asking their questions. This is not an opportunity for debate. Long introductions will not be allowed.

**Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister):** Today, I am delighted that we are announcing Executive approval for the strategic framework to end violence against women and girls and its first delivery plan. Before I continue, I would like to remember all those women who have been tragically murdered in our community recently. I extend our sincere condolences to the family and friends of Patsy Aust, Kathryn Parton, Sophie Watson and Montserrat Martorell, all of whom died in horrific circumstances over the past few months. At the weekend, we heard of another tragic loss — that of Rachel Simpson. Five women dead in a matter of weeks. Five women whose names we now know for the most tragic of reasons. There have been many others. In the past four years, over 20 women have been killed here, and their untimely deaths have had a lasting and traumatic impact on their family and friends. The depth of the loss, which is always felt, is so hard to express here in words.

All of that points to how shocking our statistics are. Behind those statistics are all those individuals. The stories of all those women who were killed must make us even more determined to act to tackle the scourge of violence, harm and abuse, which seriously impacts on the lives of too many women and girls right across our community.

Today, we bring forward a strategic framework and first delivery plan to help mobilise a whole-of-society and whole-of-government response. The strategic framework was co-designed by different voices, many with years of experience in the area, and all of whom, like us, are committed to ending violence against women and girls. We are very grateful to them for that. I acknowledge that some of them are here, in the Public Gallery, this afternoon.

The public consultation responses were overwhelming in their support for realising the

framework's vision: a changed society, where women and girls are free from all forms of gender-based violence, abuse and harm, including the attitudes, systems and structural inequalities that cause them. The framework sets out a seven-year road map and describes the changes that are needed and the work that needs to be done to bring about an end to violence against women and girls. It will help to mobilise all parts of society to improve outcomes across four key themes.

The first is prevention, which is about addressing the underlying causes of violence against women and girls to stop it before it even starts. It is the main focus of the strategic framework. We want everyone to understand what violence against women and girls is and how to take action to prevent it. We want everyone, especially our young people, to be equipped to enjoy healthy, respectful relationships. We want to ensure that women and girls feel safe, and are safe, everywhere. That means educating ourselves, our society and our young people in every aspect of their lives to ensure that we are clear that violence and abuse in relationships are never acceptable. Ultimately, we want to change society so that women and girls no longer live under that underlying threat and very real risk of harm and abuse, and it is a place where everyone can thrive and be safe.

Protection and provision of services is key to the success of the strategic framework. We will support delivery of quality front-line services for victims and survivors whilst investing in the grassroots communities that carry out amazing work in tackling that issue to build capacity and extend those services. Our strategic priorities also include strengthening the justice system to build the confidence of victims and survivors and the public and create a safe space for them to tell their stories and see justice done.

All that requires us to work better together across all parts of government and society to end violence against women and girls. We must work together to equip and empower our young people to enjoy healthy, respectful relationships. Men and boys have an important role to play in ending violence against women and girls. They are part of the solution if we are to bring about a change to attitudes and behaviour and challenge a misogynistic culture that can lead to harm, abuse and violence against women and girls.

The framework sets out and tells us clearly what needs to be done. It is shaped by real people and real-life experiences. From that, we have created an initial delivery plan, which will

deliver real-life change to people in need. That is just the beginning. We will continue to work together, right across the Chamber, to build a changed society where women and girls are free from all forms of violence, abuse and harm. Collaboration is essential for us to start to build the transformative change that is required.

The delivery plan is designed to connect and support many parts of government and other strategies and investment. That includes the Department of Justice and the Department of Health and their work to deliver the domestic and sexual abuse strategy and the recommendations of the Gillen review. Collaboration and innovation will improve front-line services, protection and provision for victims and survivors, and will therefore improve experiences and better outcomes for women and girls.

That work will support efforts across all parts of society. That includes building on the vital work of the grassroots groups and organisations across the voluntary and community sector. We have spoken to those people on the front line who help women and girls who are suffering and are in the most dire need of support and guidance. They make a difference each and every day. They are often the first port of call; a trusted and safe space for women and girls who need help. They are the continued source of support for victims and survivors. Their work on the ground is helping to address the culture of damaging attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that can lead to violence against women and girls. We must continue to support the delivery of that life-changing work. Community investment is therefore key. The plan ring-fences £3 million over two years in a change fund. That will support grassroots groups and community and voluntary sector organisations to do more to further build capacity and be better equipped to address the significant issue in their area. That way, we will see more interventions that will make a real difference to people's lives. We will announce further details on the change fund in the time ahead.

We will also develop campaigns to raise awareness. They will provide strong and consistent messaging so that there are no excuses and everyone understands the issue and the attitudes, behaviours and culture that enable and lead to this deep-rooted problem.

I have said this before, and I will say it again: there is no place in our society for violence against women and girls. It is an epidemic, and we must stop it. The harm and abuse that many suffer is often hidden in plain sight. It can affect anyone, including people whom we know. It can

affect the women and girls in our life — our mummies, our sisters, our daughters, our granddaughters and our friends — the woman who lives across the street, the woman who sits next to you in work, or the woman you meet on the bus, in the shop or at the school gates. It happens everywhere. It must stop, and there is something that all of us can do.

The framework has been designed by our society and government working together. It has been fully endorsed by the public in the consultation. It is now for all of us to continue to work together and make real change possible. That way, we can end violence against women and girls.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Thank you, First Minister, for your statement today. I really welcome the progress that has been made. It is long overdue and very positive. The elephant in the room is funding. Your statement mentioned £3 million for a change fund over two years. Do you accept that that does not even scratch the surface of what is required and that we are far, far away from the €60 million investment and 35 dedicated members of staff that the Irish Government committed to in recent days to tackle violence against women and girls?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Of course we would want to have more funding and resources, but this is a good first step. We are nowhere near the position that the South of Ireland is in; you know that. There are two different jurisdictions, unfortunately, for now. We have to deal with the reality in which we are working. It is a positive first step today to be able to announce £3 million to back up some of the delivery work that we want to see over the next two years, but it is just the start. Let us build on it and learn as we go. Right at the heart of the strategy and plan that has been set out is the idea that we can measure our progress as we go and continually look towards revising areas that we think need revision. We need to continue to invest in the area.

I wish that we were in the same position and that we could invest at the level that you referred to, but that is not our reality. However, I am pleased that we now have the strategy and framework and that there is broad support for it. We now need to see the delivery plans and the practical benefits on the ground. Let us get that £3 million out to the groups that provide first-class services every day, often on very restricted budgets. Today marks the start of our getting to a point at which we can end violence against women and girls. I think that we all have to accept that that is a reality. We can end violence against women and girls. Prevention is

right at the heart of that. We must invest. As I said, I am pleased that we have been able to do this today.

**Ms Bradshaw (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office):** Thank you, First Minister, for your statement. I echo the condolences that you sent to the bereaved families of the poor women who lost their life so tragically.

Thank you for meeting us earlier. I want to pick up on your point about the grassroots groups in the community and voluntary sector that have been battling away in this area for so long. We know that, when media attention is put on an issue such as ending violence against women and girls, there may be some women who come forward who have experienced historical cases of violence and abuse. How will they be provided for in the frameworks?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The framework is very much about ending violence against all women and girls, including anyone who has been impacted on by historical institutional abuse, but we also have a focused area of work to make sure that we have proper support for people who have come through such trauma. If, for example, throughout the lifetime of the delivery plan, we start to see that that becomes an issue of concern or launching the framework today perhaps invites more women to come forward, we would, obviously, have to adjust to reflect that. Thank you for that question.

1.15 pm

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as a ráiteas. [*Translation: I thank the First Minister for her statement.*] The strategic framework states:

*"a whole of society and whole of government approach"*

is needed to end the daily violence against women and girls. Will the First Minister confirm that the voices of those with lived experience and expertise are and will be reflected in this vital strategy and delivery plan?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for that question. She makes a relevant point. Success in this area of work has to involve us listening to people on the front line. They are at the coalface, supporting women day and daily. There is no better experience that could be brought to bear on how we should respond than the experience of those who have been impacted. Those real-life experiences and

voices have been crucial in getting us to the juncture we are at today. They help us to properly understand the journey that a woman may go through. Co-design has been at the heart of developing the strategy, and we are proud of the fact that so many partners came together to get it right. I confirm that the feedback from the consultation was positive about it being the right approach. As I said, today marks the start of our journey in ending violence against women and girls.

**Mr Kingston:** As a member of the Committee for the Executive Office, I warmly welcome today's announcement on the strategy and delivery plan. It is essential that the strategy to end violence against women and girls is not categorised as a woman's issue but is viewed as an issue for all of society. Challenging negative beliefs and attitudes towards women and girls is the responsibility of everyone. Will the Minister join me in saying that everyone in the Chamber has a role to play and that we must lead by example?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, thank you. I look forward to working with the Member and the Committee as we develop the work and see the implementation of the delivery plan. Absolutely, it is a whole-of-society problem. It is not a woman's problem. It is about all of society, and everybody has a role to play. The areas of work that we have identified in the delivery plan will focus minds on key messaging in order to ensure that people understand what violence looks like and that it comes in many forms. Getting that better understanding will help us to get to the point where we can say that we have ended violence against women and girls. I absolutely concur that a whole-of-society approach is required for us to be successful.

**Mr Beattie:** Thank you, Minister. I welcome the framework. It really is something that we can get stuck into. Much of prevention is brought about through education, and you focused on that heavily. Punishment, however, is also a clear deterrent. Outcome 5 refers to a justice system that "holds perpetrators to account" and that in itself brings societal "confidence". Our sentencing for violence against women and girls in particular is absolutely pitiful: will the Minister and Executive Office work with the Justice Minister and the judiciary so that we get sentences that are fit for purpose?

**Mrs O'Neill:** As the Member has rightly highlighted, the justice system is one of the areas that we are focused on. All Executive colleagues are committed to delivering on the framework, including the work around justice

that falls within the framework and is under the responsibility of the Justice Department. When we come at such things, prevention is the best approach. That is why the framework and delivery plan focus on prevention, but the other side is, obviously, ensuring that sentencing is appropriate. Absolutely, we will continue to work with Justice on that.

**Ms Sheerin:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as a ráiteas. *[Translation: I thank the First Minister for her statement.]* Minister, I thank you for your answers thus far and associate myself with the condolences that you passed on to the families of all the women who have been murdered recently.

I welcome the statement. It is particularly relevant given the actions of the past few weeks to which you referred. Minister, can you comment on whether you will give specific consideration to the groups of women who are at particular risk of violence such as our LGBTQI+ women, women from ethnic minority backgrounds and other women who may be at the margins of society?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thank you for that. Of course, you are absolutely right. There is no doubt in my mind that there are many women and girls across our society who will face particular and increased risks, as well as additional barriers to justice, services and support — not only women who are deaf or disabled or from minority ethnic communities or from LGBTQIA+ communities but older women, women who are financially dependent, women who are homeless, women who suffer from addiction, women who have emigrated here and women who live in rural areas. There are particular barriers that will be faced by different categories of women, and it is important that we say from the Chamber today to all of those women that we see you and hear you and that we are determined to reach you as well as everybody else.

Part of our delivery plan, as you will see, includes ensuring that we fully understand any of those additional barriers, in whatever form they may come, and understand whatever additional challenges there may be. We then have to work out how we can overcome those challenges. I assure the Member that this is, again, an area of work that will be very much evidence-based and driven by the lived experience of so many women and girls.

**Mr Harvey:** Like the Minister, I welcome the strategy and the positive difference that it will make to the lives of women and girls in Northern Ireland. What funding has been

allocated to the strategy, and where will that funding come from?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thank you for your comments on the strategy. I am delighted to say that the deputy First Minister and I have been able to secure the £3 million funding. I want to get that onto the ground as quickly as possible, so we are actively working our way through how that can be done. We have published the plan today, we know what the actions are and now we just need to be able to fund it. I think that £3 million for the first two years of the programme allows us to get moving on that work, but we need to continue to build on that and add to it as we can.

**Ms Egan:** Thank you, First Minister. This is a really welcome day, and I think of all the women in Northern Ireland who have lost their lives to gender-based violence. There are some really good positives in the delivery plan, but I want to touch on funding. Have you engaged with the co-design partners in regard to the funding that has been allocated, and are you confident that all the positive actions in the plan can be delivered with the funding?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, I absolutely can say that we have engaged with partners the whole way through. They are part and parcel of getting us to this juncture, and we are grateful. That is the strength of the strategy and of the delivery plan. I do not think that there is anybody out there who would not say that we would want to have more finances to put in this area of work. We have identified the £3 million, and we will work with the sector and the organisations to get that out onto the ground as quickly as possible.

As I said, one of the benefits of the plan is that we will do a stocktake every six months. We will report to the Executive on progress, and we will be able to identify additional areas that come on board that we, perhaps, have not planned for. We have to continually try to maximise the funding that we have for this work. We will very much work with the sector. I have no doubt that there will not be anybody in the sector who will not say that they need additional funding to do the necessary work on the ground.

**Mrs Dillon:** Go raibh maith agat, a Chéad-Aire. *[Translation: Thank you, First Minister.]* I thank the Minister for bringing the strategy to the House today. It is long-awaited but very welcome, and I am glad to hear about all the work that has been done and has been put in by all of those most impacted.

Minister, we know that there needs to be a justice response and that we need to support all of the victims, but the most important thing is to ensure that there are not victims or perpetrators in the first place and to protect all of those who end up in those circumstances. Minister, do you have confidence that all of the Ministers and all of the Departments are fully bought in to the strategy and will work in collaboration across Departments, with statutory partners and with the community and voluntary sector to deliver the strategy?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, I am confident about that. Every Department has been involved and engaged in the work that we have done to get us to this point. The fact that the Executive have signed off on this as an Executive-wide strategy shows the commitment across the Executive to this work. I have no doubt that every Member in the Chamber also supports this work. This is something that is so deep-rooted in our society, and, if we do not start to try to turn it around and end it and focus on prevention, the problem will only get worse.

You can see from the document that we talk about "Working better together", and that is very much our commitment at a ministerial level and across the sector with those who are on the ground in the delivery of the framework to make sure that we meet the needs of all. I am confident that we have that commitment to work together, and working better together applies to most things in life. We will get more done when we work together than we will when we work in silos.

**Ms Bunting:** I welcome the strategy and trust that, as it is taken forward, work will also be done with men and boys. What processes have been put in place to effectively evaluate the strategy to ensure that it is actively making a difference for women and girls?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I concur. This is not just for women to solve; it is for everybody in society to solve. The piece of the jigsaw around education is crucial in making sure that we have clear, consistent messaging across society, including in our school system.

With regard to being able to measure our progress, written into the plan is an outcomes-based accountability framework. We will have an oversight board in place that will report twice a year to the Executive. Those reports will be not just from the Executive Office but across all Departments and all strategies that are aligned to the framework. In the coming weeks, we will talk about the Department of Justice and

Department of Health domestic and sexual abuse strategy (DSA). All those things will be interlinked and complementary in many ways. It is important that those things are aligned. I am confident that we can measure our progress as we go.

**Mr Baker:** I thank the Minister for her statement. It is extremely important that we instil in our young people, in society and, particularly, in men and boys an understanding of what healthy, respectful relationships are. Does the Minister agree that that will be a key component in addressing violence against women and girls?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, I absolutely agree. As I said previously, it is an everyone issue. We have to take that approach to it, otherwise we will not be successful in ending violence against women and girls. All the evidence tells us that most acts of violence against women and girls are by men, so the problem will not be solved without the support of men and boys. We need them to be allies in this area of work. They are an integral part of the solution, so it is important that we talk to young people and, in particular, men and boys about their role in getting us to the point where we eradicate violence against women and girls.

**Ms Brownlee:** I welcome the strategy. I want to touch on grassroots organisations in local communities. How will they be involved in delivering protection and services on the ground? Will you touch on the likes of alcohol abuse and mental health services and how those can be supported moving forward?

**Mrs O'Neill:** There are strategies around those last two areas, but none of these things can work in silos. To have a whole-of-society approach, we have to come at everything in a holistic and collective way. We want to be able to say more about the change fund and how we will get the £3 million on to the ground over the coming weeks. We are working our way through the practicalities of what that looks like, but I assure the Member that we will make sure that that is widely publicised and that groups know what they can apply for, the quantum of it and the area of work that they can deliver. We will be able to document a lot more about that once we get to a final juncture, so we will be able to say more in the coming weeks.

**Miss McAllister:** I thank both Ministers for the statement this morning and welcome its launch. Notwithstanding the independence of the judiciary from the Department of Justice and the Executive Office, it is important that all parts of

our criminal justice system work together in tackling violence against women and girls. I want to ask specifically about the issue of bail. I think of the brutal murder of Katie Simpson. Her murderer was let out on bail and not remanded back into custody. How will the First Minister and deputy First Minister engage with the judiciary regarding that aspect of bail and those who are charged with serious offences against women?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Perhaps it would be better if I came back to the Member in detail in writing, because a lot of that comes under the remit of DOJ and what it is doing, but I am very happy to follow it up with a more holistic response.

In answer to a previous question, I said that none of these things can be looked at in isolation; they need to be looked at in the round. Our strategy is around making sure that prevention is at the heart of our plan. That is the best solution so that we do not focus all our efforts at the end point, but, clearly, we have to when terrible, horrible murders have occurred.

On the particular question of granting bail, I will ask DOJ to write to the Member.

**1.30 pm**

**Ms Hunter:** I join the First Minister in thanking the incredible organisations and their staff who are here today. Without them, the strategic framework and the first delivery plan would not have been possible. It is a very positive and historic day for ending violence against women and girls. So many victims of sexual violence feel that an important aspect of violence that needs to be addressed is the retraumatisation that they experience in our court system. What has been included in the strategy to support victims and survivors who are going through our courts? Can the First Minister provide any detail of any conversations that she has had with the Justice Minister on the matter?

**Mrs O'Neill:** One of our key themes is around the justice system, because we know, as the Member has said, that going to court is a very traumatic time for any woman who has experienced violence. Going through the justice system and feeling that retraumatisation is something that has to be tackled. I am very glad to say that, yes, we have been working with the Department of Justice on that area. It is one of our key themes, and something on which we are going to make improvements. We will be able to say more about that as the plan develops. The Member can see from the first delivery plan that it is an area on which we are

focused in the first two years, because we identify it as being one of the areas on which we need to see early progress made. We hope to keep Members up to date on the work that we are doing. When it comes to justice, for example, one such area of work is the My Justice Journey platform, which will allow us to improve access to information and support and to build confidence in the justice system. That will be a very targeted campaign to ensure that people have the fullest information. It will represent a good development by addressing some of the areas to which the Member has just referred.

**Ms Kimmins:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as a ráiteas. [*Translation: I thank the First Minister for her statement.*] I commend the launch of the strategic framework and the ambitious first delivery plan. As other Members have said, incredible work is already being done on the ground in our communities to help prevent violence against women and girls but also to help those who are suffering abuse and harm every single day. Will the First Minister outline how she will continue to support the groups and organisations that carry out that life-changing work?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes. That goes right to the heart of how we will use the £3 million that we have identified for the change fund. As I said, it is only the beginning, in order to allow us to get moving on the first two-year plan. The investment in our community and voluntary sector will enable all those grassroots groups and regional organisations to expand the number of on-the-ground projects in response to particular issues on which they are already working. I hope that our supporting them through that investment will enhance the work that they do so well. Many of the groups and organisations are ready to scale up if we can secure additional funding. It is that type of work that makes a hugely positive difference to people's lives. It transforms people's lives. I want everyone to be clear that our ambition for the programme is to do what we can in the immediate future but also, for the next seven years, to determine how we can continue to build on what we have announced today and continue to create that long-term transformation in society.

**Mr Mathison:** I thank the First Minister for her statement. I join my colleagues in welcoming the launch of the strategic framework today. A number of Members have referenced the importance of education in tackling violence against women and girls. Will the First Minister confirm what engagement she will have with the

Education Minister to ensure that any interventions in our schools are accessed by all pupils in Northern Ireland and will not be a lottery based on the priorities that individual schools set?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The Member will know that we recently had a debate on that topic. I agree that, in today's world, there is so much misleading information and mistruth out there, and it is so easily accessed, often online, by all our children and young people and by adults. It is therefore more important than ever that our young people have age-appropriate information that is consistent and is provided in school and also that they have trusted adults to speak to and engage with.

As you know, the Department of Education is reviewing the relationships and sexuality education curriculum. The Member will have a role to play in trying to shape that review. We need to reach further and beyond, however. It needs to be got right in schools but also beyond there, in wider society. How therefore do we support community groups that work with young people with messaging, for example? How do we support families as they navigate the complex world in which we live today?

The healthy relationships forum that is led by the Department of Education is reviewing not only what we teach our young people but how we equip the trusted role models in our schools, communities and homes. Our change fund will also have a role to play in supporting groups that work with young people in particular.

**Mr McAleer:** I thank the Minister for her statement. I note that the framework is based on lived experiences and on the expertise of those who work every day to end violence against women and girls. How will the progress of the strategic framework and delivery plan be measured?

**Mrs O'Neill:** It is a scenario in which we can clearly measure our progress. We will have an oversight board. That will not just be in Departments but will work with the sector. The framework will be benchmarked regularly. We will have regular reviews, and we will be able to monitor how effective we have been or, perhaps, where we have not been effective and need to do better. I am confident that we have built into the plan the tools to measure progress.

**Ms Armstrong:** Thank you, First Minister. I am delighted to hear your answer about the oversight board. You talked about collaboration,

co-production and co-design: does that mean that, as part of the oversight board, the community and voluntary sector will continue to have a role in updating and amending the framework moving forward, if needs be?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes. We have developed a performance management framework that will monitor progress against our objectives. Part of the work to be undertaken under the first delivery plan that we have set out today involves the establishment of baselines. That will support the effective measurement of progress, which will be able to be monitored at both programme and project level on an outcomes-based accountability basis. We want to ensure that the oversight board will be cross-sectoral and include representation from local government, the community and voluntary sector and independent experts, the people who helped design the framework that we have today.

**Mr McGuigan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Chéad-Aire. [*Translation: Thank you, First Minister.*] I thank the First Minister for her statement, and I note that she spoke about the women who have lost their lives in horrific circumstances in recent weeks. Does the First Minister agree that the launch of the framework and delivery plan is essential and timely?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes. Every loss of life or every woman who has experienced violence is too many. It is so timely that, today, we reach the point of announcing the framework and delivery plan, given, as I said, the number of women who have so tragically lost their lives to something that is preventable. Violence against women and girls is preventable. I referred to five more names, and enough is enough: it is time for it to stop and for everybody in society to step up and make sure that this is the end. Today, as a society, we start on a journey towards the point at which we can end violence against women and girls and create an environment where we say no to everyday sexism, misogyny and abuse and do so collectively.

**Ms Nicholl:** My thoughts are also with the victims of violence. There are survivors in the Public Gallery today, and I pay tribute to them.

Under "Working better together", the plan includes conducting the first phase of gap analysis of violence against women and girls provision. Is there a timescale for that analysis and for the roll-out of additional phases?



**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes. Gap analysis is important. In year 1 of our two-year plan, we will have research on men and boys' attitudes and behaviours related to violence against women and girls. We also want to evaluate the criminal justice support worker pilot that ran in Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid and to conduct the first phase of gap analysis for violence against women and girls — provision in general and specialist services — to help to inform further policies. If we are to keep advancing and making strides forward, it is important that those areas of work go ahead. The first piece is around research on the attitudes of men and boys, but we will do the three pieces of work over the next two years.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the First Minister for her statement. I also put on record my sympathy to the families of the ladies lost to violence and my solidarity with those who suffer the scourge of violence day and night.

We have heard that prevention, education and early intervention are crucial. Effective punishment also plays a part, but does the strategy say anything about the role that the rehabilitation of offenders might play in reducing the risk to women across our society?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The strategy is very much focused on prevention; that is at the heart of the strategy. Rehabilitation will fall to the Department of Justice. That is outside the framework but runs alongside it, because all these things are interlinked.

**Ms Mulholland:** I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I am keen on outcome 3 about women and girls feeling safe everywhere, with a particular focus on creating a safer night-time economy for audiences and artists in our arts venues and spaces. I am keen to understand how, on an ongoing basis, all Departments will feed into the strategy when it comes to changes to policies or regulations, such as licensing regulations or mandatory training for entertainment venues and licensed premises.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thanks for that. There is a dedicated stream on being able to go out and socialise safely, which is really important. A group is now in place. As we develop the strategy, when any changes come forward, that group should be the filter that provides the lens. I think that is how it will operate, but I will confirm that. We now have a ready-made group: why would it not become the filter and lens for the framework and what we are trying to achieve? We have to make sure that it gives

us feedback. Where we need to adapt policy, regulation or legislation, that is what we should do.

**Mr Gaston:** Last week, in evidence at the Executive Office Committee, the Equality Commission suggested that transgender rights are a gap in equality legislation. In Scotland, there was a ridiculous situation where a rapist was held in a female prison before, rightly, being moved. Is there anything in the strategy to defend women-only rights and women-only spaces and to oppose the efforts of a biological man who thinks he is a woman to gain access to female-only spaces?

**Mrs O'Neill:** It is unfortunate that you take that approach, but we will not be distracted. We are here to launch a strategy to end violence against women and girls. It is endemic in our society, and it must stop. The focus of the framework is on prevention and tackling the root causes of violence against women. We will remain focused on the work that we are trying to do. It is a whole-society approach. I encourage you even to get behind it, because it is really important. It is about women who are being murdered. We need to end violence against women and girls. I would like to think that everyone who has been elected to the Chamber has the same goal in mind.

**Mr Carroll:** Thank you, First Minister. I join you in remembering those who have been killed by partners or ex-partners. Intimidation points are still not awarded to women who are harassed by current or ex-partners. I am keen to hear how the strategy will work in respect of that problem.

The £3 million does not seem a lot, given the scale of the problem and the fact that it is endemic in our society. What financial support will be given to support women who want to leave abusive partners but are economically trapped?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thanks for that. I go back to the point that the strategy is about prevention. It is vital that we focus on prevention and ensure that the violence does not happen. That will take time, of course. We will not do it overnight, but we have to start somewhere, and today is the start of that work. I agree with you about the intimidation points. My party colleagues have also raised that issue. It is separate from the preventative piece and the framework, but, yes, collectively, we, as an Assembly, should look towards how that can be rectified in the housing system.

On the £3 million comment, this is the start of a plan. It is £3 million for the first two years. I hope we can build on that, particularly when we find areas of work where we can invest more. We will not be found wanting in trying to find every penny that we can to tackle what is the biggest issue facing our society.

1.45 pm

**Ms Sugden:** First Ministers, I welcome the strategic framework launch. I also appreciate that both First Ministers have taken it forward, almost as a flagship policy priority for this mandate. That sends a clear message about how serious the issue is. I join the First Minister in paying tribute to the victims of violence, not just those who have lost their lives, or who are trying to move on from what has happened to them, but those who will, inevitably, lose their lives in the future, because this is not going to fix things overnight.

Does the First Minister genuinely have Executive buy-in from all Ministers? I am mindful of the fact that, six months ago, the previous Health Minister cut funding to Nexus, and then, reactively, reinstated it because of public outcry. We also had an Assembly debate, prior to the summer, in which the Minister of Education did not support a change to RSE in schools. That change would encourage healthy relationships, which is a big part of the wider societal piece that you talked about.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member. I know that you also raised the issue earlier during Members' statements, so thank you for that. I also know that you will get behind the framework.

All Executive Ministers signed up to the framework. It is now a collective Executive strategy, so it is down to the collective Executive to make it happen. I can say no more than that. I can tell you that I am determined, and I know that the deputy First Minister is determined, to ensure that the framework and delivery plan are live from today. I encourage people to look them up online. We want people to be engaged in them. The hard work starts here. We have a huge opportunity to turn this tanker and to end violence against women and girls. It is incumbent on us to get to the point at which we end violence against women and girls. If we do nothing else in this Assembly mandate, is that not the thing to do? Thanks to everybody for their contributions to the debate.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Members, that concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two as we prepare for the next item of business.

## City and Growth Deals Funding Commitment

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** The Speaker has received notice from the Minister of Finance that she wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members, again, that questions must be concise.

**Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance):** Thank you for the opportunity to provide the Chamber with an update on the deplorable decision by the British Government to pause their funding commitments to the city and growth deals until the spending review. Members will have heard by now that, on Saturday evening, the Secretary of State, Hilary Benn, confirmed that the signing of the Derry City and Strabane District Council city deal will go ahead. I am aware, and thankful, that other Members had been making representations to reverse the previous ill-considered move, and I am glad to confirm that the deal-signing event is back on and will take place this Wednesday morning in the Guildhall. The Secretary of State also confirmed, late last night, that, following communication with Treasury, nothing has changed on the status of the Belfast region city deal. While I welcome that move, the pause must be lifted immediately on the Causeway Coast and Glens growth deal and the Mid South West growth deal.

As Members will be aware, there are four city and growth deals: the Belfast region city deal; the Derry City and Strabane District Council city deal; the Causeway Coast and Glens growth deal; and the Mid South West growth deal. The growth deals initiative is a package of capital investment of some £1.7 billion from the Executive, the British Government, councils and deal partners. The British Government pledged £617 million for four deals across the North on the basis that the Executive would match fund that investment. We have done that and have added another £100 million to the pot, making it a £717 million contribution. Councils and deal partners then added significant funding to the overall investment, which is seen as a catalyst for local economic growth.

Over 60 projects are being developed that will be delivered across the four deals, covering every council area. That substantial capital investment and the numerous projects that are in development will be truly transformative for

local regions and the North as a whole. The projects range from cutting-edge innovation centres and research facilities to digital transformation projects alongside developments in local infrastructure, exciting tourism offerings and the regeneration of local cities and towns.

We became aware of the British Government's decision to pause their funding commitments until the spending review only when officials were informed on Wednesday. I immediately informed my Executive colleagues and took action to raise the matter with the British Government. During a meeting with the Chancellor in London on Thursday, the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and I outlined our shock and laid out the dire consequences that such a decision would have, urging a reconsideration. We conveyed the considerable time, effort, commitment and enthusiasm that have gone into the deals for years and advised that plans and contracts have already been put in place at significant cost to councils, project promoters, the Civil Service and Whitehall Departments.

We also made clear that such a short-sighted decision could risk private-sector confidence in the investment, the securing of which has been a key objective of the deals. The Chancellor advised that I should engage with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on the matter. I wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that evening to ask for an urgent call, the courtesy of which has still not been extended to me. I had hoped that the British Government would provide space for proper political engagement to get a positive outcome and a commitment to proceed with city and growth deals, honouring the pledges that have been made for some years. Those pledges have included official announcements, financial profiling and British Government Ministers signing different deal documentation for three of the four deals so far — what are known as "heads of terms" and deal signing.

On Friday afternoon, the NIO informed representatives from the four deals of the decision to pause the funding commitments. That reprehensible decision came less than a week before the scheduled signing of the Derry City and Strabane deal. The Derry City and Strabane deal-signing event was called off shortly afterwards. Thankfully, common sense prevailed, with the British Government coming to the right decision late on Saturday evening, which has now enabled the Derry City and Strabane District Council deal-signing to go ahead as planned on Wednesday. From speaking with the council's chief executive on Saturday night, I know that the reinstatement of

the deal signing has come as a huge relief to the council and deal partners, who have invested significant time and effort in preparing for that important milestone, which will allow funding to begin to flow to the cutting-edge projects and bring real change to the region.

While some level of common sense has prevailed, we are now faced with the incomprehensible decision to treat the deals differently. I am clear that there can be no disparity of approach. The approach that has been taken could undermine the momentum and confidence of deal partners in the Causeway Coast and Glens and Mid South West growth deals, who have put so much time and effort into developing the many projects. I spoke to the chief executives of those councils this morning and assured them that I continue to press for the immediate reversal of the pause in the funding commitments to those deals.

I am very frustrated and angry about the British Government's handling of the matter. The lack of information to and formal communication with Departments and deal partners is totally unacceptable, and it is not how I would expect people to do business. If the British Government are serious about resetting relationships, they must seriously reflect on this shambolic episode and put an end to this appalling behaviour. It is completely unfair that Causeway Coast and Glens and Mid South West growth deals would have to wait until the spending review for clarity.

The British Government must immediately lift the pause on the Causeway Coast and Glens and Mid South West growth deals. It is time for them to have a reset on their reset. Those city and growth deals will be game changers for our cities and towns and a catalyst to boost economic development and create good jobs. It is crucial that all deals continue as planned.

I will continue to impress upon the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that the British Government must honour their commitments and pledges made to the city and growth deals, which will be transformative for our cities, towns and regions, bringing hope and prosperity right across the North for our citizens, communities, businesses and future generations.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Thank you, Minister. Members, I think that we have time for one question before Question Time.

**Mr O'Toole:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Minister, the SDLP has long been a champion of city and growth deals, including when others were not so enthusiastic, so we are frustrated

and disgusted by the ineptitude and chaos that we saw on Friday night, and we support the call to ensure that all city and growth deals proceed as planned. Could the Minister be specific about the conversation that she had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on Thursday, because it appears that there was a conversation about this? The Minister made representations to her. Was she aware that this had happened? Was she unaware? What was the specific ask that the Minister made, and what was her response? It is important that we, including those on the Finance Committee, understand what went wrong here.

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for his question and for his support in this matter. As I set out, I laid out our shock at the news that we had received just the day before; the considerable time, effort and commitment that had been put in by deal partners right across the North; and the consequences that such a decision would have and how negatively it would be received.

I cannot answer as to whether she had previously been aware. I assume that she was, because we had, obviously, engaged at official level in advance of travelling to London, but she advised that I should engage with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, which I did immediately. He would have had an email in his inbox before I arrived back to Belfast. I had, as I said, requested an urgent call, and I have not yet had that call, which is really disappointing. I do not think that that is how you should do business, and I would expect better.

I am continuing to press that all those deals go ahead as planned and that the pause on the funding commitment is lifted.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Minister, thank you.

Members, I am afraid that I must interrupt the proceedings as it is time soon for questions to the Minister for Communities. After Question Time, we will start again on this item with questions to the Finance Minister. The next question then will be from Philip McGuigan. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two for a change at the top Table.

*The business stood suspended.*

**2.00 pm**

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Communities

**Mr Speaker:** Question 6 has been withdrawn.

#### Social Inclusion Strategies: Next Steps

1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister for Communities when he will announce his next steps in relation to the social inclusion strategies. (AQO 766/22-27)

**Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities):** I will be writing to Executive colleagues before the end of September to outline the next steps in developing the anti-poverty strategy. Details of the proposed timetable for the next steps in developing the disability, gender equality and sexual orientation strategies will follow in the coming weeks.

**Mr O'Toole:** Minister, we have now been waiting more than seven months for meaningful progress on the inclusion strategies. A few months ago, when we had an Opposition day focused on poverty, the Opposition were dismissed and told that lots of work was happening in this area, but, as of now, we have not seen a single strategy published. We have not seen the anti-poverty strategy, the gender strategy, the disability strategy or the strategy on sexual orientation. Obviously, we did not get any detail in the Programme for Government about when they will be published. Can you be specific today and give me dates of when one or possibly all of those strategies will be published?

**Mr Lyons:** Just because you do not see the work going on does not mean that work is not taking place. That work has been happening, and I outlined in the answer — perhaps the Member had already prepared his supplementary question before he listened to the answer to the first question — and was clear in saying that I will write to Executive colleagues before the end of September.

I also do not accept what he says about the Programme for Government. Although there is no specific reference to the anti-poverty strategy, it is clear that so many of the areas in which we are bringing forward work will be used to tackle poverty. For example, getting good housing for people in Northern Ireland is a way to tackle poverty. Getting more and better jobs for people in Northern Ireland helps us to tackle

poverty, as does better educational attainment and, indeed, better health outcomes. All of those will contribute to reducing poverty, and I look forward to being in a position to publish that strategy in the near future. Of course, the Member will understand that it will be subject to Executive referral and approval.

**Mr Kingston:** Given the rise in poverty with the cost-of-living crisis, will the Minister commit to prioritising the anti-poverty strategy?

**Mr Lyons:** Absolutely, but not just because there is a legal duty on me, as there has been on all of my predecessors since 1998, but because this is an issue that we need to tackle. We need to see real progress on this because too many of our people are out of work and too many of our people live in poverty, and we need to do everything in our power to change that. I am committed to doing that, and I am taking concrete steps to make sure that greater progress has been made on the issue than at any time in the past.

**Ms Mulholland:** Minister, given the deadline that you have spoken about — we had it in our DFC key deliverables plan for 2024-25 — are any initiatives being discussed to combat rising poverty levels?

**Mr Lyons:** Absolutely. We are doing a number of things that help to minimise the risk of people getting into poverty, limit the impact of poverty and help people escape poverty. The strategy will bring those together, add measures and make sure that we have Executive buy-in so that we can do something concrete. I am determined that we will deliver on that.

**Mr Allen:** Can the Minister detail the last time his officials engaged with the expert panel members who helped shape the strategies?

**Mr Lyons:** It is important that we have that coordination and that we listen, and it will certainly be my intention to make sure that the strategy is viewed and that we have further time for input on the strategy. The Member will forgive me: I do not have the specific date that he asks for, but I am happy to provide it to him.

## Winter Fuel Payment

2. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister for Communities for his assessment of the impact that the British Government's decision to means-test winter fuel payments will have on fuel poverty. (AQO 767/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** As I said when it was announced, restricting the winter fuel payment will have a detrimental impact on many in our society. For those who are less well off, it creates an additional financial burden and comes amid a range of cost-of-living pressures. I have already made crystal clear to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions my opposition to this decision, and I have outlined the impact that it will have on people in Northern Ireland.

A household is considered to be in fuel poverty if it must spend more than 10% of its household income on all fuel use. The last house condition survey identified the types of households most likely to be impacted by fuel poverty. It reported that 31% of households with one or more people of pensionable age are likely to be in fuel poverty. The rate increases to 38% of households headed by a person over the age of 75.

Given the decision to move annual winter fuel payments to a means-tested system, the fuel poverty strategy will aim to minimise the impact of the change on pensioners at risk of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. We will analyse the impact of the removal on pensioners who are above the threshold for winter fuel payments and income-related benefits and are susceptible to fuel poverty.

**Mr Gildernew:** Thank you for that, Minister. Given the number of rural properties that have been identified with that crossover, will you outline the steps that you can take or are considering taking to mitigate the effect on rural homes that may not have access to gas or other forms of heating?

**Mr Lyons:** It is absolutely the case that rural homes are affected even more than others by fuel poverty. I addressed that in my response to Deborah Erskine last week. Of course, we will see it reflected not just in the fuel poverty strategy but in the energy strategy that is being brought forward. How do we tackle fuel poverty? It is not just about raising incomes but about making sure that people have to spend less of their income on heating their home. That is where energy efficiency, in particular, is important.

**Ms Forsythe:** Will the Minister ensure that the fuel poverty strategy reflects the Labour Government's cuts to payments?

**Mr Lyons:** Absolutely. We are making good progress on finalising the parameters of the fuel poverty strategy, but it will obviously have to change now, because there is a significant

difference from what was the case. It is possible that many more older people will fall into fuel poverty, so we need to make sure that we take all the steps that we can to address what, unfortunately, is a new aspect to the issue because of the decision of the Labour Government.

**Ms Armstrong:** Minister, when it comes to the winter fuel payments, we know that affordable warmth is important. Can you confirm that the Housing Executive will direct that scheme first at pensioners who live in homes that have not yet been retrofitted, in order to make their heat as affordable as possible?

**Mr Lyons:** I will absolutely raise that issue with the Housing Executive at our next meeting. I will encourage it to take all the steps that it can to make sure that we identify and help those who will be most affected by the decision.

**Mr Durkan:** I will follow up Ms Armstrong's question and the Minister's answer encouraging the Housing Executive to target with its affordable warmth scheme pensioners impacted by the loss of the payment. Will the Minister outline how he expects the Housing Executive to do that when the budget for the affordable warmth scheme has been cut by 53%?

**Mr Lyons:** Of course. I am grateful to the Member for raising that issue. It is right that we identify the serious budgetary situation in which we find ourselves. That is why I and, I hope, the Member will continue to press for additional funding for the key schemes and strategies that my Department implements that have an impact on reducing so many of the societal problems that we face. It is also why, in bringing forward a new fuel poverty strategy, we will make sure that we look at innovative ways to target the money and make sure that we help those most at need.

**Ms Sugden:** Minister, the change to the winter fuel payment will bring in a new process that will undoubtedly cost money. How much will it cost, compared with the savings that the British Government are trying to make?

**Mr Lyons:** I do not have the details of the change, first, because it is for a UK Government and the Department for Work and Pensions to issue it. I do not expect any direct cost to the Department. The savings will probably be fairly limited overall. On the additional expense for the system, it may just be about pressing one or two buttons to change it. I hope that there will be no additional

expense to it. However, it is clear that the decision will have further ramifications. There may be a saving of around £44 million in Northern Ireland, but that will end up costing us a significant sum of money, because we will see an increased number of people having to visit their GP or, perhaps, even being hospitalised because they are no longer able to heat their home in the way that they did. That is not only shameful but not very clever.

**Mr Carroll:** Stormont's decision on means testing means that hundreds of thousands of people will lose out. What work have the Minister and his officials completed in order to recognise the benefits of the universality of public services and of public supports such as the winter fuel payment?

**Mr Lyons:** The first part of the Member's question serves to demonstrate how he does not listen. He claims that it was a decision for Stormont, but we do not have the finances to keep the scheme going and make the payment universal. We do not have the means to do that without having access to the DWP system. I do not see how the blame can be laid at the door of the Executive when we do not have the ability to do those two things. I am, however, committed to doing whatever I can to make sure that we support those who are in need.

## Housing Supply Strategy

3. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Communities when he will publish the new housing supply strategy. (AQO 768/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** I am in the process of finalising the housing supply strategy. It remains my intention to bring the strategy to the Executive for their consideration shortly. Publication will be dependent on Executive approval.

**Mr Blair:** I thank the Minister for his answer. At this stage, can he give any detail on discussions that he has had with the Department for Infrastructure about the reform of the planning system or with the Department of Finance about budgets to ensure that the housing supply strategy can be properly implemented?

**Mr Lyons:** I have had conversations with the Minister of Finance and the Minister for Infrastructure. The Member's question raises important issues. First, planning is one of many issues that affect our ability to build homes. We need to look at a number of aspects of how we operate our planning system, especially

statutory consultees' response times — that is one particular issue that I raised with the Infrastructure Minister — and at the need to make sure that we can encourage responses as quickly as possible. It may be necessary to go beyond encouragement at times.

In the many meetings that I have had with the Minister of Finance, I have emphasised to her the need for more investment in our social housing budget. In order for people to have a safe, secure and warm home, it is incredibly important that we have the necessary funds to continue the social housing development programme at the required pace. I hope that those conversations will produce fruit.

**Mr Bradley:** What does the Minister believe to be the most important actions, especially on water and sewage infrastructure, that can be taken to improve housing supply across the regions of Northern Ireland?

**Mr Lyons:** We can take many actions to ensure that we have a greater supply of homes in Northern Ireland. In the private sector, we absolutely need to look at availability of land, at planning and at water infrastructure. All are important. One of the single most important things that we can do, however, is to see the change that is required to the Housing Executive's borrowing powers come about. "Game changer" is used all too often in this place, often inappropriately, but the revitalisation of the Housing Executive programme would truly be a game changer for housing supply in Northern Ireland, significantly changing our ability to build the houses that we so desperately require in Northern Ireland and bringing us into line with housing associations in, for example, England and Wales. I have had conversations about that with the Finance Minister and other Executive colleagues, and I believe that the necessary support exists for us to get those changes made and to get agreement from the Treasury. That would truly be a game changer.

**Mr McNulty:** Minister, what hope can you give to the 47,000 — 47,000 — people who are on the housing waiting list, given that you have confirmed that only 600 social houses will be built this year?

**Mr Lyons:** I hope that the Member was listening to my previous answer. We are in a very constrained budgetary position. Even if my budget were to be doubled, it would not put us at the number of social homes that we need to build. We therefore need to look at alternatives. That is why I introduced the intermediate rent

model. It can make a difference. It is why I am pushing for the revitalisation of the Housing Executive programme. Those are two examples of things that can make a difference, and I am determined to pursue them.

2.15 pm

## The Northern Ireland Football Fund

4. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister for Communities to outline when The Northern Ireland Football Fund (TNIFF) will be open for applications from interested groups. (AQO 769/22-27)

13. **Lord Elliott** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the business case for The Northern Ireland Football Fund. (AQO 778/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** Mr Speaker, I believe that question 4 has been linked to question 13.

**Mr Speaker:** Yes.

**Mr Lyons:** Thank you. The Northern Ireland Football Fund will provide investment for football at all levels. It is a key priority for me. I am committed to moving forward as quickly as possible, and my officials are continuing to push forward at pace. I want to roll out the funding as quickly as possible. However, it is important that funding be disbursed in a fair and transparent manner. I expect that the first projects to be taken forward under the fund will be identified by the end of this financial year.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Thank you, Minister. I also thank the Minister for his visit to west Tyrone in July. He saw at first hand the tremendous work being done with children and young people by the football clubs there. Will the Minister ensure that grassroots football remains a commitment for The Northern Ireland Football Fund?

**Mr Lyons:** Yes. It is critical that we invest in grassroots infrastructure in Northern Ireland. Of course, there is huge need at performance level, but grassroots football cannot be forgotten. I appreciate and thank the Member for his invite to west Tyrone. I saw there the important role that those clubs, like so many other clubs that I have visited right across Northern Ireland, play in the local community and how they help more people to get more active more often, which is a key priority for my Department. I assure the Member that I will do everything that I can to make sure that we get that funding out to the clubs that need it.

**Lord Elliott:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I declare an interest as the chair of a Northern Ireland Football League (NIFL) football club. I welcome the Minister's progressing of The Northern Ireland Football Fund. A business case fund, which seemed to form an element of The Northern Ireland Football Fund, was launched by his Department last October. Will the Minister provide an update on that? Have any clubs progressed through that process yet?

**Mr Lyons:** The Member will be aware of the first 10 clubs that were able to benefit from the business case funding. I recently announced a further three clubs that will have the ability to get the funding that they need. I hope to be in a position to continue further down the list and allow clubs that need the funds that I will make available to progress works to apply for the programme.

**Ms Kimmins:** On the grassroots element of the football fund, I met groups over the summer that are willing the fund to open soon. Will the Minister provide a timeline for when we can expect the grassroots element of the fund to open, given that he said that he hopes that letters of offer will go out for the 2025 financial year?

**Mr Lyons:** The performance clubs will be first, not overall but in the performance element of it. I hope that we will be able to initiate those conversations in December, with the application period opening in January. I hope very early in the new financial year to allow grassroots clubs to apply.

**Mr Mathison:** What steps will the Minister take to ensure that funding is equitably distributed among communities and football groups across Northern Ireland?

**Mr Lyons:** When I announced The Northern Ireland Football Fund, I set out some of the criteria that clubs will be expected to adhere to. There certainly will be fair and equitable treatment, and, importantly, the process will be transparent.

## **Pensioners: Financial Support**

5. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the financial support that is available to pensioners this winter. (AQO 770/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** Pensioners who are on a low income may be entitled to pension credit, which is a means-tested benefit for people over state

pension age. On average, people on pension credit can be better off by around £4,400 a year and are passported to other support, such as help with housing costs and NHS costs, and there are free TV licences for those aged over 75.

Winter fuel payments will continue to be paid to all pensioners who are in receipt of pension credit and meet the eligibility criteria. Pension credit recipients also receive cold weather payments of £25 a day for any seven-day period of very cold weather between November and the end of March each year. Pensioners on low incomes may be able to access support from my Department's discretionary support service, which can include an interest-free loan to help with fuel costs.

**Mr Irwin:** I thank the Minister for his response. Has there been any increase in pension credit uptake, given the shocking announcement by the Labour Government?

**Mr Lyons:** Yes, there has been. In August 2024, 889 people applied in Northern Ireland, compared with 610 in the same period last year. In July 2024, there were 663 applicants, compared with 526 last year. We are seeing an uptick in the number of people who are applying for pension credit. Only two weeks into this month, we have already had over 550 applications. I encourage Members to continue to highlight the importance of pension credit and to get people to apply. I know that it is a long process, but, with the average uplift being £4,400, it is certainly worth it.

**Ms Ferguson:** The Minister would agree that, when it comes to financial support, the affordable warmth scheme is critical, particularly for our most vulnerable people and pensioners on low incomes. Can he outline whether the scheme is unable to be continued for new applications, due to the chronic and sustained underfunding by the British Government? If so, what conversations have been had to support vulnerable people whose applications are being processed, or any new applicants?

**Mr Lyons:** I have certainly raised that with the UK Government. I told them, first of all, about the need to change their minds on the winter fuel payment, and also, if that is not the case, to ensure that we have sufficient support in place for older people, especially those who are most vulnerable. The affordable warmth scheme is, absolutely, a lifeline to many people, and makes long-lasting changes, not just for one year. That is why I will continue to do all that I



can to ensure that we can keep that open, and also to ensure that we find a replacement for that scheme under our new fuel poverty strategy.

## Discretionary Support Scheme

7. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Communities when he will announce his decision in relation to the recommendations of the expert panel, appointed to review the discretionary support scheme. (AQO 772/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** My officials have been working to identify options to progress the expert panel's recommendations in the context of the current climate of financial constraint. I will provide an update to Members once that work has been completed.

**Mr McGlone:** The Minister will be aware that that report was published in March 2022. It is now 30 months' old. At what stage will we have an injection of a bit of vitality into the decision-making process? It is a good scheme, but it would be well worthwhile to take on board and implement a number of the report's recommendations.

**Mr Lyons:** Absolutely. It is incredibly important and is a genuine lifeline for many people. We are working our way through the review. Some of the important recommendations have, of course, already been implemented, but, as the Member will be aware, others will require significant financial commitment.

## Housing Stress

8. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for Communities to outline his Department's plans to reduce housing stress in areas where there is high demand. (AQO 773/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** The social housing development programme (SHDP) is a three-year rolling programme of planned social housing schemes, based on the identification and analysis of housing need by geographical area. The formulation of the SHDP is shaped by the Housing Executive's strategic guidelines, which ensure that the programme targets those areas of greatest social housing need. In managing the programme, the Housing Executive administers the housing association grant to facilitate the delivery of social housing, and directs housing associations to identify and bring forward development opportunities in

those areas of greatest unmet social housing need.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Minister for his response. It was a bit convoluted. Given the shortage of funding for housebuilding, can he ensure that he will stand over houses being built and delivered on objective need, rather than along sectarian or social engineering lines, and that houses will be allocated to those who are in housing stress on the housing waiting list?

**Mr Lyons:** I am sorry if the Member believes that my answer was convoluted. I was simply setting out the process for how the funds are allocated. I can certainly assure the Member that I am not doing anything on the basis of sectarian decision-making.

## Energy Efficiency and Decarbonation

9. **Mr Honeyford** asked the Minister for Communities whether he will introduce funding for the installation of energy efficiency and decarbonisation measures for low-income families in domestic properties. (AQO 774/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** Improving energy efficiency and installing decarbonisation measures in homes is a vital part of addressing fuel poverty and meeting our requirements under the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. My Department is responsible for the affordable warmth scheme, which aims to assist low-income owner-occupiers and households in the private rented sector with an annual household income of less than £23,000. The scheme provides a range of energy efficiency measures, including loft, cavity wall and solid wall insulation; the replacement of inefficient heating systems; and the replacement of windows, where appropriate. My officials are in the early stages of developing a new and more ambitious fuel poverty energy efficiency scheme for low-income households to replace the current affordable warmth scheme, which ends in 2026.

**Mr Honeyford:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline how he is going to meet the carbon goals in relation to housing as we move into the years ahead?

**Mr Lyons:** Of course, as we all know, the House passed the Climate Change Act, which gave us the climate change targets. Those are going to be incredibly difficult for us to meet. Of

course, they were beyond what was recommended by experts at the time. We now have to live with the consequences of the decision that this place made.

The schemes that I have outlined will contribute to net zero targets. That is important, as residential decarbonisation is significant, but what is more important is ensuring that people have a warm home to live in. That is where the real benefit comes from.

## Winter Fuel Payment

10. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Communities how many recipients of the winter fuel payment will no longer be eligible as a result of proposed changes to the scheme. (AQO 775/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** Two hundred and forty nine thousand, six hundred.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Minister for his answer, which was given with brevity. Two hundred and forty nine thousand is an incredible number; it is almost a quarter of a million. Will the Minister detail the concerns that he has raised about the disproportionate effect that it will have on pensioners in Northern Ireland, given that it is a disproportionate number? Will his Department introduce a support scheme, such as the previous emergency fuel payment scheme, to assist householders who are in need?

**Mr Lyons:** I have raised the issue and highlighted the impact with UK Ministers on a number of occasions, including with Ministers in the NIO and different Ministers in DWP and elsewhere. To put the number in context, it is over 80% of pensioners in Northern Ireland. So, it is not just the rich, millionaires or people who can easily afford it: many people who are just above the threshold are going to be significantly impacted by the decision.

Regarding mitigation, we will certainly do what is in our power. We need to wait to see what Barnett consequentials might be available. We then need to make sure that we help those who are in need.

## Winter Fuel Payment

11. **Mr Gaston** asked the Minister for Communities what discussions he had with his Executive colleagues to identify savings to retain winter fuel payments for all pensioners. (AQO 776/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** As I have said, I strongly disagree with, and am totally opposed to, the Labour Government's decision to change the winter fuel payment eligibility criteria. I am very concerned about the serious consequences that it will have on the comfort, well-being and health of older people across Northern Ireland. I circulated a paper for Executive discussion, detailing the implications of the changes to the winter fuel payment following the Chancellor's statement. The paper outlined the estimated £44.3 million of additional costs, excluding additional delivery and staffing costs, to the block grant of maintaining the universal payment. The paper also estimated the cost of delivering an appropriate IT system to deliver universal winter fuel payments in Northern Ireland to be between £5 million and £8 million, with a further 20% of the development spend per annum for support and maintenance.

The Member will be aware that, in order for me to have stood still this year in the Department, an additional £130 million would have been necessary. I received £13 million. I have already had to make significant savings this year. I did not have the room in my budget to enable the payment to continue. However, as I have said on many occasions, not only did we not have the budget available but we did not have the means to deliver it due to the absence of a suitable IT system.

**Mr Gaston:** I thank the Minister for his answer. We have heard much talk about the problem with the computer system. Why did that problem not arise when we broke parity on the bedroom tax?

**Mr Lyons:** There was a longer lead-in period for that. DWP is changing its system to allow for the changes that are taking place across the whole of the United Kingdom. We asked whether there was any capacity to allow us to do things differently, but the indications that came back were that that was not possible. The difference with the other mitigation measures that the Member raised is that those were done with a much longer lead-in period, which enabled those payments to be made.

2.30 pm

**Mr Speaker:** We will now move to topical questions.

## Casement Park

T1. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Communities when and how he learned of the

UK Government's decision not to fund the Casement Park project. (AQT 511/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** My private office was emailed at 6.32 pm on Friday. That email was forwarded to my departmental email address at 7.00 pm.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. It seems that the Minister, once again, is the last to know. Just before Question Time, we heard in the Finance Minister's statement that her officials learned on Wednesday that the British Government were to pause their funding commitments. Does he not think it odd that, as Minister responsible for the Casement Park project, he was not informed of their decision until more than 48 hours later?

**Mr Lyons:** I can only reflect to the House what happened with the timings of the decision. What has taken place with the Government over the past week is, to put it mildly, inappropriate. When announcements are made, it is right and proper that Ministers are able to answer questions on them and speak to the media. Of course, neither of those things happened.

## Winter Fuel Payment

T2. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for Communities, having noted that there has been a lot of hand-wringing by the Minister to try to distance himself and his Executive colleagues from his decision on Friday 30 August at 3.30 pm to cut the winter fuel payment and without knowing whether that is the result of a guilty conscience, whether he regrets making that decision. (AQT 512/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** I communicated my decision to Members as soon as I was in a position to do so. The urgent procedure request that I was granted was delivered to me, and I informed the Assembly as soon as I could.

When it comes to my role in all that, we were given the facts by the UK Government. We were told of the changes that they are going to put in place. After work that my officials did, I was informed about what it would cost. We were informed about the issues in and around the IT system as well. We were left in the position of being told that we do not have the resources to continue it or the means by which to take it on.

Perhaps the Member might have taken the approach of burying his head in the sand and pretending that the problem is not here, but officials made it clear that if we did not confirm our decision with the UK Government, they

would go ahead and change the DWP system for only Great Britain. That would have meant that nobody in Northern Ireland would have had access to their winter fuel payment. The Executive were not pleased about the decision in any way, but making it was preferable to sitting on our hands and letting everybody in Northern Ireland lose their winter fuel payment.

**Mr Carroll:** The truth is, Minister, that you buckled under Keir Starmer. You could have stood strong against him, but you failed to do that. You also failed to listen to the hundreds of thousands of people who will be impacted by that decision. Minister, what work have you, your officials and your Department carried out to work out the number of excess winter deaths that will occur as a result of that decision? Make no mistake, that will be the result of it.

**Mr Lyons:** It is very disappointing that the Member simply cannot understand what I am saying to him. It is very straightforward and simple. It is very concerning that an MLA, as someone who sits in the House, is unable to process and understand that information and simply parrots the kinds of things that he says.

I share the concerns that many have expressed about the impact that the decision will have on people right across Northern Ireland. The UK Government's decision was given to us at very late notice. We did not have time to put in those sorts of assessments, but, unfortunately, the Government have not done so either. I do not think that that was because they did not have time; they have not bothered to put together an impact assessment of how their decision will affect the most vulnerable. That is shameful. I will do everything that is in my power to make sure that we get extra funding where it is available, support those who are in need and use our existing programmes to support people. Unfortunately, in Mr Carroll, we have a Member who does not even understand the process.

## Olympics and Paralympics: Achievements and Legacy

T3. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Communities to outline his plans to ensure that we adequately celebrate and recognise the phenomenal achievements by all our Northern Ireland athletes at the Olympics and the Paralympics. (AQT 513/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** I am grateful to the Member for the question, and I know that he has an interest in this, with a gold medal winner coming from his constituency. I was delighted to be able to celebrate with Rhys, Jack and others that

evening. I am pleased to be able to say that there will be a celebration event for all our athletes, not just those who were medal winners. It is absolutely right that we celebrate their achievements. That event will be in the SSE Arena, and, Mr Speaker, I may even invite all Members so that we can all celebrate together.

**Mr Harvey:** Thank you, Minister. Can you also provide us with an update on how you can ensure that there is a real legacy from the success of our athletes?

**Mr Lyons:** Yes. Although it is right that we celebrate the amazing achievements of our Olympians, it is also appropriate that we set in place all that is necessary so that we can have a real and lasting legacy from those incredible games. We need to make sure that we are directing the proper resources towards those performance athletes and also the grassroots so that we can build up for the future. I know that we all want to celebrate the amazing achievements, but let us make sure that we also build a legacy for the future. I will play my role in that.

## Fuel Poverty Strategy

T4. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Communities, having in previous answers referenced the fuel poverty strategy, to give a definitive date for when that strategy will come forward. (AQT 514/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** Unfortunately, I am not able to give a definitive date on that because it will be subject to Executive approval, but I can reassure the Member that we have progressed with it at pace. As I have said, we have done more on it than has been done for some time, and I am looking forward to being able to share that as soon as possible.

**Mr Allen:** I am sure that the Minister, as with other Members, including me, is being contacted almost daily by members of households who are struggling to heat their homes. Can he therefore give a guarantee that the fuel poverty strategy will be truly cross-departmental and will have meaningful and tangible outcomes that will be felt by those householders struggling to heat their homes?

**Mr Lyons:** Yes, absolutely, because it will be successful only if it is cross-departmental. Energy has a large role to play in this. Infrastructure will have its role, and Health, in my view, absolutely has a role as well. Not only

will it be beneficial for it to be Executive-wide but it is necessary.

## US/NI Cultural Working Group

T5. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the US/NI cultural working group. (AQT 515/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** I am really impressed by the commitment and dedication shown by the members of the US/NI cultural working group. Excellent work has been done in collaboration with the United States. There has been good collaboration between National Museums NI and the Smithsonian Institution and between the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) and the National Archives. I look forward to being in a position to announce more on that very soon.

I think that it is also really important that we take advantage of the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and make sure that Northern Ireland remembers and recognises its role in that part of the history of the United States.

**Mr Irwin:** I thank the Minister for his response. What else can he commit to in support of the work of the Ulster-Scots Agency and that of the many other organisations that support the Ulster-Scots tradition?

**Mr Lyons:** The Member is right to mention the Ulster-Scots tradition because it goes far beyond a language and is about the culture, history, heritage and tradition that we want to celebrate. It goes beyond our shores. It is not something from here that remained here; there is so much more for us to celebrate throughout the world. That is why I have introduced the US/NI cultural working group. I believe that there is huge potential that has not been exploited in the past, and I am determined that we do that in the future.

## Housing: Investment

T6. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities, having thanked him for his comments about Ulster-Scots culture and welcomed those comments as a former festival Irish dancer, about the reaction that he has had from Westminster when he has raised the issue of the housing crisis and the need for investment in Northern Ireland. (AQT 516/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** I had the opportunity, in recent weeks, to meet a number of UK Government Ministers, Northern Ireland Office officials and others in housing, and I have expressed to them the issues around housing in Northern Ireland. The main issue that I have been progressing with them is the need for Treasury to change its rules around the Housing Executive so that we can see better maintenance of our stock and more housebuilding in Northern Ireland. I believe that is something that the Government have taken on board.

**Ms Armstrong:** Thank you, Minister. You mentioned that the housing strategy is coming forward. Can you share with the House what priorities you will have to ensure that all people have access to an appropriate home to prevent homelessness?

**Mr Lyons:** Homelessness is a key priority for me, not only because of the seriousness of the situation but because of how much we currently need to spend at the end, when it is most expensive. We should invest earlier to make sure that we prevent homelessness rather than address it when it arrives. The housing supply strategy is so important because all the bits fit together, and all the different tenures are important for increasing supply. In order to do that, there are many different partners against many different Departments. That is why I have been progressing that work at pace.

## Poverty: Tackling the Causes

T7. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Communities what action he is taking to deal with the causes of poverty, given that we often deal with the effects, and although Members have heard a lot about his anti-poverty strategy today, we all recently received an email from the Trussell Trust that said that almost four in 10 — 37% — people who claimed universal credit in Northern Ireland ran out of food in the past month and did not have enough money to buy more. (AQT 517/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** It is absolutely right that the Member raises that issue. My Department does significant work to tackle the impact of poverty, but that is not good enough any more. We need to tackle the root causes of poverty. There are a number of issues that we have discussed before, and it is about housing, health and education, but what is really important is getting people into work. That is one of the greatest barriers that people face right now to getting out of poverty. That means that we need to be in a position where we are giving tailored support,

where necessary, and I have raised that with the Government and given them examples of where we have been able to make a difference.

You only have to take some of the figures around disability and employment. We are way behind where we should be and way behind the rest of the United Kingdom, and we need to ensure that we have the tools to get people the support that they need to get back into work, because that is one of the best ways that we can tackle poverty.

**Ms Bunting:** I am grateful to the Minister for his answer. My constituents, along with many others across Northern Ireland, are living in damp and mouldy conditions, and because they are in poverty, they are not able to pay for remedial works themselves. The Trussell Trust points out that just over four in 10 people claiming universal credit in Northern Ireland are either behind on bills and credit commitments or are finding it a constant struggle to keep up with them. They cannot afford to do the work themselves, and if they were able to afford to do it themselves, the Housing Executive would not stand over the work. Doubtless, there is a considerable backlog of maintenance. What will the Minister do to tackle the delays in maintenance across Housing Executive properties?

**Mr Lyons:** Those are serious issues, and I encourage the Member to feel free to come to me if she feels that there specific examples that she thinks that I can help her with. In respect of those other, wider issues and what we can do to help, she mentioned the Housing Executive and reiterates why it is important that we ensure that the Housing Executive gets the powers that it needs to borrow against its assets to make improvements in the homes that we are talking about. That will save us money later on. I will say it again and again: if we can prevent problems at an earlier stage, we will end up saving not just money but a lot of grief for people. That is why we need to make sure that this is changed and that we have the proper investment. Revitalisation is the way for us to do that.

## Housing Executive: Investment Through Borrowing

T8. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Communities to clarify whether the discussions with Treasury, to which he has referred a number of times, specifically referenced the ability of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to increase investment through

borrowing to improve our housing stock. (AQT 518/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** That is the issue that I was talking about. We need to make sure that the rules are changed with Treasury so that we can see that borrowing against our own stock, not only to improve the properties like the ones that Ms Bunting was talking about but to ensure that we can build more homes. That is exactly what I was referring to.

2.45 pm

## Finance

### Shared Prosperity Fund

1. **Ms Egan** asked the Minister of Finance to outline what discussions she has had with the UK Government regarding the UK Shared Prosperity Fund beyond March 2025. . (AQO 780/22-27)

**Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance):** The future of the Shared Prosperity Fund beyond March 2025 is of immediate concern and is something that I have been pressing the British Government for progress on. I wrote to Angela Rayner MP as soon as she was appointed Secretary of State, highlighting the lack of information on a successor programme and the impact that this uncertainty is having on our community and voluntary sector. I asked that she deliver on the Labour Party manifesto commitment for greater devolved decision-making. I have also written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to raise my concerns on this issue.

Tomorrow, I will be meeting Minister Alex Norris, who is responsible for future funding in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. I will use this opportunity to once again press for urgent clarity on future funding, asking that sufficient funding is provided and that there is a meaningful decision-making role for the Executive.

**Ms Egan:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, what is your assessment of the funding shortfall that has arisen as a result of the loss of EU funds?

**Dr Archibald:** From memory, the European regional development fund (ERDF) and the European social fund (ESF) jointly provided the Executive with about £65 million per year. In comparison with that, the Shared Prosperity Fund provides an annual average of about £35

million. That leaves a real funding gap of about £30 million annually, and that is before inflation or anything else is taken into account. In my meetings with the British Government, as in all the representation that we have made previously, we will seek full replacement of funding that we used to get from EU sources, including an inflationary increase.

**Ms Ferguson:** Minister, when future funding is being discussed and developed with your Department, will that include collaboration with the community and voluntary sector as well as local government?

**Dr Archibald:** Collaboration is absolutely key to ensuring that any funding we get and the delivery of programmes with that funding aligns with our local priorities, learns the lessons of previous funding programmes, does not duplicate anything that we are already doing or any existing provision and ensures best value for money. In my view, the best way to do that is meaningful collaboration with the people who are delivering the programmes: the community and voluntary sector and other partners, including local government. Also, in preparation for the successor fund, my Department has already begun working on a cross-departmental basis and has been engaging with the community and voluntary sector to understand the lessons from the Shared Prosperity Fund and to be prepared for moving forward.

**Dr Aiken:** Minister, obviously, with the Shared Prosperity Fund and the events of last week, there is a degree of, let us say, scepticism about the approach of the UK Government to the funding. Has the Minister had any opportunity to reach out to her Welsh or Scottish counterparts to have a combined approach to make sure there is an equitable division of future UK shared prosperity money?

**Dr Archibald:** The Member will be aware from his role in the Finance Committee that we do regular engagement through the Fiscal Council with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers. Just last week, I had a conversation with the Scottish Finance Minister around the financial challenges facing us collectively at the minute. We have collaborated in the past and, I am sure, will collaborate again and have joint positions and jointly make the case on the replacement of EU funds and the post-2025 funding. It is really important that, where we can have a shared position — often we come from a similar perspective — we make those joint representations.

**Mr McNulty:** The original Shared Prosperity Fund was clearly not designed with the North in mind, and these institutions had little control over what decisions were made or how they were made. What conversations has the Minister or her officials had with the new British Government to address those problems, and what commitments has she sought or got?

**Dr Archibald:** I agree with the Member's assessment of the Shared Prosperity Fund: it was not designed with the North in mind and certainly did not take on board the criticism or feedback that was provided on its structure, one of the most important aspects of which was that there was no section 75 consideration in the delivery of funds. We have continuously made the representation that there needs to be a more joined-up approach. We have consistently said that we should have control of the delivery of the funding streams, because we could then align them with our priorities and ensure that they fit with other Executive priorities and that we do not duplicate funding streams. We have made and I will continue to make that point. As I mentioned to Connie, I will meet the Minister responsible tomorrow.

**Mr Carroll:** There is a growing call for a 1% tax on the wealthiest 1% in Britain to bring in £25 billion to plug the gap in public services. Did you or your officials raise such a point when you met the Treasury last week?

**Dr Archibald:** I have been consistent in highlighting the underinvestment in our public services and the fact that, with the new Government in place, after 14 years of austerity and chaos under the previous Tory Government, we need a change of approach. We need the prioritisation of investment in public services and in ordinary workers and families. Those who have the broadest shoulders — those who can afford the most — should pay the most. I have consistently put that message across to the British Government, and I did so to the Chancellor last week.

## Marriage Law Reform

2. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister of Finance what progress has been made to develop legislation on marriage law reform. (AQO 781/22-27)

**Dr Archibald:** I have previously indicated to Members my intention to introduce a Bill to amend the current law on marriage and civil partnership to bring belief marriage within the statutory framework and to bring forward the important increase in the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership to 18. My officials

have finalised instructions to legislative counsel, and the drafting of a Bill is ready to commence. A paper was submitted to the Executive before the summer recess seeking approval to proceed with the policy and the drafting of a Bill. That paper has yet to secure a slot on the agenda, despite that having been requested for the past four meetings. I very much hope that it will be considered at the next available opportunity to enable those important proposed reforms to proceed and to be debated by the Assembly.

**Ms Ennis:** I thank the Minister for her response, and I welcome her focus on the issue. How far has work to amend the law on marriage and civil partnership progressed?

**Dr Archibald:** Policy development is complete. My officials briefed the Finance Committee on the marriage and civil partnership Bill on 17 April, and Committee members were supportive of the changes. I circulated a paper to Executive colleagues on 21 May and asked for it to be tabled at the Executive meeting on 13 June. A final version was available for the Executive meeting on 19 June. Since then, the paper has failed to reach the agenda of the Executive meetings held on 18 July and 5 September.

My Department is not able to make further progress until Executive approval is secured. It is unclear to me, given the clear support for reform that the consultation process indicated, coupled with the broad support that the proposals received from the Finance Committee, why agreement to proceed should be further delayed. It is important that we move to legislate, and I appeal to colleagues to support the proposals so that we can get a Bill to the Assembly for consideration in 2025.

**Mr O'Toole:** Minister, it is my job to hold you to account, occasionally robustly — I am sure that you enjoy that — but, on this occasion, I acknowledge that you have a lot on your plate. Your Department is doing a lot, and there is a lot in the area of civil law reform, such as marriage, including, hopefully, no-fault divorce, and defamation. Is it not time to move responsibility for civil law from your Department to the Justice Department, where it is in almost all other jurisdictions? There is a huge amount going on — the fiscal position, the Budget, spending restraint — so why is it still with your Department? Should it not be with the Minister of Justice?

**Dr Archibald:** The Member will be aware from his role as Finance Committee Chair that a

number of civil law issues sit with my Department. That has been the case since the Department was put in place. I do not necessarily agree with the Member about the need to move it to the Department of Justice.

**Mr McMurray:** Will the Minister provide an update on her plans to introduce no-fault divorce in Northern Ireland?

**Dr Archibald:** Yes. It is an issue that I am keen to progress. We debated the matter in the Chamber a number of months ago, and I have asked my officials to scope out what will be required and bring forward policy proposals.

### **Rating: Non-domestic and Domestic Measures**

3. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Finance to outline when she expects to publish the findings of the consultations on the non-domestic and domestic rating measures. (AQO 782/22-27)

**Dr Archibald:** My Department published a summary of the consultation responses on the non-domestic and domestic rating measures last week on the Department's website. Over 1,400 responses were received from ratepayers, businesses and a range of other stakeholders. My Department also undertook a series of public meetings as part of the process, and I thank everyone who contributed to the process with their thoughts, ideas and experience. I met officials at the end of August to outline the next steps in advancing policy, and I will bring forward short-, medium- and long-term rating policy proposals, including a more strategic long-term policy approach, early next month. As part of the process, I will engage with Executive colleagues and continue engagement with business bodies, organisations and other stakeholders to work together to build a progressive rate system that grows our tax base and stimulates our local economy.

**Ms Sheerin:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. *[Translation: I thank the Minister for that answer.]* Minister, can you advise when you intend to bring your policy proposals to the Executive?

**Dr Archibald:** I met officials at the end of last month to advance policy proposals. I intend to bring forward proposals on what we can do in the immediate term and then in the medium and longer term early next month to the Executive. Obviously, decisions on the issues will be for

the Executive as a whole to consider and decide on.

**Mr Tennyson:** Minister, the previous Government set a revenue-raising target of £113 million annually. Will you update the House on progress towards meeting the target?

**Dr Archibald:** As the Member will be aware, that requirement was part of the financial package. We did not agree to it, but, nonetheless, that was Treasury's position, and I was able to negotiate some flexibility so that it could be raised over 24 months rather than 12. I am happy to give Members the update that it is projected that we will raise an additional £80 million this year. That is based on decisions that the Executive have made on the regional rate and other areas.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a Aire, as bheith anseo leis na freagraí a thabhairt dúinn. *[Translation: Thank you, Minister, for being present to provide us with answers.]* There are reports that you plan to phase out industrial derating. Will you clarify whether that is the case? I am sure that you agree with the rest of us that it is a substantial advantage and its removal would be severely disadvantageous to many of our SMEs and manufacturing businesses, particularly given their dual access to the respective markets.

**Dr Archibald:** As part of my consideration of the responses to the consultation, I had the opportunity to meet business organisations and businesses. Obviously, I will not pre-empt any proposals that will go to the Executive for discussion or decision, but I very much recognise the role that industrial derating has played in supporting local manufacturers. We have a strong manufacturing sector that supports an awful lot of jobs, and anything that we do needs to align with what we are trying to achieve with our economic vision of creating good jobs, improving productivity, decarbonisation and regional balance. The manufacturing sector ticks an awful lot of those boxes.

**Mr Butler:** Will the Minister outline the expected revenue from the proposals to remove the exemption provided by industrial derating? Has she considered — I think that she has already spoken to this — the impacts on the manufacturing sector in Northern Ireland?

**3.00 pm**

**Dr Archibald:** I will give the Member a figure off the top of my head that I will be happy to



clarify because it will be in the consultation. I think that industrial derating costs £70 million. As I said, I will not pre-empt any proposals that will go to the Executive for discussion. Obviously, anything that we consider doing in relation to the rating system has to be about being progressive, fair and equitable, but it also has to be about what we are trying to achieve in respect of the economy, as I have just set out to Patsy.

## Childcare: Barnett Consequentials

4. **Mr Gaston** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the Barnett consequentials for 2024-25 arising from enhanced childcare provision in England. (AQO 783/22-27)

**Dr Archibald:** The Executive received £57.2 million of Barnett consequentials for 2024-25, following the announcement in the spring Budget of the expansion of the 30 free hours of childcare scheme in England. Barnett consequentials are, of course, unhypothecated, meaning that they do not have to be used for the purposes for which they were issued but, rather, in line with the Executive's priorities. The Executive as a whole recognise the importance of delivering for children and young people in our society. That is reflected in the fact that the Executive invested an additional £25 million this year to progress measures supporting early learning and childcare initiatives, including measures to stabilise the sector. That funding is already making a difference through the new childcare subsidy scheme, which had almost 10,000 children signed up to it within just two weeks of it opening. The families of those children will see their childcare bills reduced from September 2024. Despite the significant financial pressures on the Executive's Budget, we are committed to making childcare more affordable for families. That was reflected again in the draft Programme for Government that was published last week.

**Mr Gaston:** Thank you. Twenty-five million pounds is some way short of the £57.2 million that, the Minister told us, we received, which means that £32 million is being spent elsewhere. We see much chest beating about what we are doing for childcare: why are parents being short-changed, and why is that money being diverted elsewhere?

**Dr Archibald:** The Member will be aware of the significant financial pressures facing the Executive's Budget that I outlined to the Chamber last week. Departments project pressures of £767 million for this year. As I mentioned in my previous answer, Barnett

consequentials that come across for any issue are unhypothecated and have to be utilised by the Executive in the way that they decide.

The interim package of measures that we have put in place is designed to inform the Executive's early learning and childcare strategy, which has long been in development. It is also designed to support the sector. I am aware from conversations with the Education Minister that a ramping up in capital investment is required to support the expansion of the 22.5 hours per week preschool provision, as well as to ensure that the childcare sector is able to expand its support. Certainly, despite their constrained Budget, the Executive have shown that we prioritise childcare by the £25 million that we held centrally and for which the Education Minister subsequently brought forward proposals. We seek to build on that, and I am sure that we will invest further in it.

**Mr Kearney:** Ar an ábhar chéanna, a Aire, *[Translation: On the same point, Minister,]* what other Barnett consequentials do you expect our power-sharing Executive to receive?

**Dr Archibald:** We know that we will receive additional resource Barnett consequentials in-year, but the total of those will not be confirmed until we get our Westminster Supplementary Estimates, which is usually in January. Given the pressures that we face, I asked my officials to engage in discussions with Treasury on the likely direction of travel for Barnett consequentials. The final level of consequentials is, obviously, dependent on what additional funding Whitehall Departments get and if they have an ability to deliver savings. There is some degree of uncertainty, but it is my intention to allocate an additional £500 million.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Part of the reason why childcare costs here have spiralled out of control is the failure to keep pace with spending across the water on childcare support. Will you guarantee, now that it is a priority in the Programme for Government, that you, as Finance Minister, will prioritise childcare and that, when the relevant consequentials come along, they will go to where they are most needed, which is childcare? Failure in this place has led to out-of-control costs.

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for her question. We showed how childcare was a priority for the Executive, because, despite the really challenging budgetary situation that we found ourselves in, we still ring-fenced money specifically for childcare. Childcare is one of the

priorities in the draft Programme for Government, and, as the Member will be aware and as all of us would hope, the Budget will be aligned to priorities in the Programme for Government.

When Barnett consequentialia come across, Ministers will often make the case that they should be used for the purposes for which they were allocated in England. The whole point of devolved government, however, is that we make decisions that align with our own interests. Childcare is a priority, which is reflected in the Programme for Government and in the fact that there was a ring-fenced pot of money for it in the Budget. Certainly, it is something in which I intend to invest in future.

**Mrs Guy:** As part of a broader childcare strategy, is the Minister considering introducing support through the rates system for early years and childcare settings, building on the experience in Scotland and Wales?

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for her question. That is, obviously, something that has been considered. The intention of any support that we put towards the childcare sector is to make childcare more affordable for parents and families. The analysis is that the amount of money that would go towards individual providers may not make a significant contribution to a reduction in fees for parents. However, I am open to further consideration of the idea, and, were the Education Minister to make any policy proposals in that space, I would be open to considering them.

## Derry and Strabane City Deal

5. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Finance to provide an update on the progress of the Derry and Strabane city deal. (AQO 784/22-27)

**Dr Archibald:** There had been excellent progress on the Derry City and Strabane District Council city deal, which was preparing for deal signing this week. As you will now be aware, the British Government took the deplorable decision to pause their funding commitment to city and growth deals until further consideration in the spending review. The British Government delivered that shocking news to deal partners on Friday afternoon. Derry City and Strabane District Council was then forced to cancel its deal-signing event, which had been planned for Wednesday 18 September in the Guildhall and for which invites to a large number of guests had already gone out.

After widespread uproar and appeals to reverse that reprehensible move, I received a phone call from the Secretary of State late on Saturday evening. He advised that the British Government were going ahead with the Derry City and Strabane city deal, and an email followed from his office confirming that.

Following that, late on Sunday evening my office received an email from the NIO stating that the Secretary of State was also happy to confirm that, following communication with Treasury, nothing had changed on the status of the Belfast region city deal.

I am pleased to say that Derry City and Strabane District Council has reinstated the event planned for Wednesday and that the Derry and Strabane city deal will be signed. That will be a momentous milestone for the people of the north-west, and I am glad that sense has prevailed. It is now essential that the pause on funding commitments is lifted as a matter of urgency for all deals, which should not have to wait until the spending review for clarity.

**Mr McAleer:** I thank the Minister for her response and share her sentiments on the deplorable decision and the shocking news of such a reprehensible move. It is good that the deal is back on track. She will be aware that there are other deals: I think of the Mid South West deal, which covers the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council and Mid Ulster District Council areas, and, of course, the Causeway Coast and Glens growth deal. Does she have any update on the progress of those deals?

**Dr Archibald:** The Member will be aware that I made a statement just before Question Time. My clear view is that the pause on the funding commitments to those deals needs to be lifted. There can be absolutely no disparity between the deals. I met the chief executives and representatives of the Mid South West deal and the Causeway Coast and Glens deal this morning, and I share their frustration and anger at the handling of the matter. I reassured them that I am in their corner. There can be no disparity of treatment between the deals, and it is essential that the pause on that funding commitment be lifted. I have followed up with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, making it clear that Mid South West and Causeway Coast and Glens should not have to wait for that clarity. I will speak to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury this afternoon, and I appeal again to the British Government to reverse that appalling decision.

**Mrs Erskine:** I thank the Minister for coming to the House to make a statement. I am conscious that she will be coming again to answer questions, and, no doubt, I will have more.

The Mid South West growth deal is for my area. How does that decision fit in with our policy of stripping out regional imbalance? We now have a situation in which some council areas have growth deals in place, while others are paused. How does that fit, and is it being taken to the Treasury and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland?

**Dr Archibald:** I completely agree with the Member's analysis. She represents the Mid South West deal area, and I represent the Causeway Coast and Glens area, and we probably share frustration at the difference in treatment that there now is between the deals. Certainly, that is the case that I made to the Chancellor on Thursday about all the deals in general as well as the fact that they are about promoting local economic development. They are about creating jobs in local areas and addressing the infrastructure deficits that we have, particularly in rural areas, in certain parts of the North. The deals are game changers for regions across the North, and that is why I will continue to make the case that that pause be un-paused as soon as possible.

**Mr Crawford:** Will the Minister update us on her Department's role as the responsible accounting body for city deals and on how she is ensuring effective governance?

**Dr Archibald:** The Member will be aware that the Department of Finance leads on the delivery of the city and growth deals, but they involve partners, including local government and private-sector partners, and are delivered across a number of Departments. My Department takes the central role and, as you would imagine, was very active over the weekend in communicating not only with partners but with Treasury to try to ensure that the pause that was put in place on the funding commitment is lifted. People are working hard to ensure that that is the case for the remaining two deals.

**Mr Durkan:** I welcome the work that has been done over the weekend to get the deal back on track. I know that my party colleague Colum Eastwood was especially active on that over the weekend. The Minister told us in her statement that she became aware of the proposed pause in funding on Wednesday. She and the First Minister raised it with the Treasury on Thursday. Did the Treasury indicate at any

stage or in any way how or when it intended to make its decision and position public?

**Dr Archibald:** No, it did not, and, in fact, it was communicated at official level and brought to my attention only on Wednesday afternoon because it was such a concerning announcement and came as a bolt out of the blue. They are really important projects that have been years in the making. The handling of the matter and the communication, in particular, has been absolutely shambolic. There has been no formal communication with deal partners, which, again, is deplorable. Those points I will, of course, relay and have already done so. We need to see a bit of reflection on how the British Government engage not only with us as an Executive but with our constituents.

## Funding for Northern Ireland

6. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Finance to outline her discussions with the new British Government regarding the need for additional funding. (AQO 785/22-27)

**Dr Archibald:** I met the Chancellor in London last week along with the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That followed an initial meeting with the Chancellor in July shortly after she came into office. I also separately met the Chief Secretary to the Treasury at the end of July. The meetings provided an opportunity to highlight the Budget pressures facing the Executive and to make the case that the Executive need to be properly funded and to be able to deliver the public services that people here expect and need.

### 3.15 pm

However, as set out in the Prime Minister's statement and in the Chancellor's statement — they have been at pains to point out that a difficult Budget is coming — public finances are under extreme pressure, with Whitehall Departments being asked to find savings. Scotland and Wales are also facing significant pressures. The action being taken by the Scottish Government has been well publicised. While there will be further Barnett consequentials later this year, they will fall significantly below the level of pressures that we are currently facing. As I outlined to the Chamber last week, I will continue to make the case to the British Government that more funding is needed for public services and to support our families, workers and businesses.

**Mr Speaker:** We will move on to topical questions.

### **Casement Park: Executive/British Government Engagement**

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Finance, in light of the fact that there was a discussion about city deals with the Chancellor on Thursday, whether, in addition, the question of the funding of Casement Park was raised by her, the First Minister or the deputy First Minister and, if so, what she was told by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and, if it was not raised, why not. (AQT 521/22-27)

**Dr Archibald:** Obviously, the issue of Casement Park has been raised on many, many occasions with the Chancellor and with all levels of the British Government. We had been told on a number of occasions that a decision was imminent, and it came on Friday evening after many, many months of dither and delay from the previous Tory Government, who effectively ran down the clock and left us in the position that we are now in.

**Mr O'Toole:** Minister, if I understand the answer that you have just given, the issue was not raised, because I think that you would have told me specifically if it had been raised at Thursday's meeting. If it was not raised at Thursday's meeting, were you or your officials made aware at any point before Thursday of the decision that the UK Government were going to announce on Friday? Could you confirm that the issue was not raised on Thursday?

**Dr Archibald:** We took the opportunity to raise the need for investment in public services and capital infrastructure. At no point were my officials made aware that an announcement was being made on Friday evening.

### **Rate-setting Process**

T2. **Mr Gaston** asked the Minister of Finance to confirm whether, as he understands it, her Department has commissioned Ulster University to carry out work on who is best placed to set non-domestic rates going forward, with a view to having business rates simply set by the Executive, and to outline when she expects that work to be completed to allow councils to make the necessary preparations for the 2026-27 rate-setting process. (AQT 522/22-27)

**Dr Archibald:** The economic policy centre conducts research on behalf of a range of people. My Department had asked for some research to be done on the poundage across the North and the impact of the poundage across the different council areas. That is a slightly different issue from the one to which the Member refers.

**Mr Gaston:** It certainly is. It is where I am going with my question. Last year, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council set a business rate with a staggering increase of 11.86%. Is the move that I refer to in the Minister's Department a safeguard being brought in by the Department of Finance to protect businesses from that happening in the future?

**Dr Archibald:** There is research being looked at and that does not necessarily lead directly to a policy change being implemented. As I said in my previous answers on the rates consultation, proposals will go to the Executive on the short-, medium- and longer-term rates measures in coming weeks, and it will, of course, be for the Executive to decide.

### **Government Estate: Sale of Buildings**

T3. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Finance to provide an update on the sale of Clarence Court, Netherleigh House and Victoria Hall. (AQT 523/22-27)

**Dr Archibald:** My Department is progressing an ambitious review of its office estate, with the aim of reducing the in-scope footprint by 40% by March 2028. The sales process is nearing completion for Netherleigh House, Clarence Court and Victoria Hall, and officials are confident that sales will be completed in coming weeks.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Minister. Mr McGuigan rather.

**Mr McGuigan:** Thank you for the promotion, a Cheann Comhairle.

I thank the Minister for her answer. What difference will the sale of those properties make to public finances?

**Dr Archibald:** The sale of the buildings will enable some much-needed capital funding to be reinvested in public services, as well as reducing building costs for the Executive, including the costs of energy usage.

## Barnett Consequentials

T4. **Mr Crawford** asked the Minister of Finance whether, at the meeting on Thursday, the Chancellor of the Exchequer committed to the Barnett provisions anticipated in the Executive's 2024-25 Budget. (AQT 524/22-27)

**Dr Archibald:** If I understand the question, the Member is asking about the additional Barnett consequentials that are based on our assumptions after discussion with the Treasury. They are based on engagement at official level about what is likely to come to the Executive for the rest of the year. As I said in my previous answers, the Barnett consequentials will not be confirmed until we get Supplementary Estimates in January. The Chancellor is not in a position to confirm the Barnett consequentials at this point. The allocations that I intend to make are based on the direction of travel and discussions between officials.

**Mr Crawford:** I thank the Minister for her answer. If and when she receives such commitments, will she commit to sharing the details with the Finance Committee as soon as possible?

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for his question. Of course. The relationship between the Department and the Committee is one where such information is regularly shared. We try to be as transparent as possible.

## Causeway Coast and Glens Growth Deal

T5. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Finance for clarification about the match funding that sits in councils and with other private partners now that the Causeway Coast and Glens growth deal has been paused, with millions of pounds potentially disappearing from plans that were developed over many years and, as she will know only too well, huge economic and social implications for constituents there. (AQT 525/22-27)

**Dr Archibald:** I agree with the Member. It is really concerning. As he knows, an awful lot of effort and time went into developing those projects. We signed the heads of terms for the Causeway Coast and Glens growth deal back in April. There has been considerable investment in developing the business cases. Unfortunately, we still have a lot of questions on which we cannot give answers to deal partners. I met the chief executive of Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council this morning and

relayed my reassurance that I am doing all that I can to get the answers and get the pause lifted.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Minister for her efforts for all our constituents in that regard. Has she had any indication from the Labour Government on how long our constituents will have to wait for the spending review?

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for his question. My understanding is that the Government mean 30 October, the Budget date. However, I await full clarification from the Treasury on a lot of issues. It is my view that Causeway Coast and Glens and Mid South West should not have to wait until the end of October before getting the same clarity that the deals will go ahead that Belfast region and Derry City and Strabane have had. There should be absolutely no disparity between the deals.

## Property Management Companies

T6. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Finance whether her Department is engaged in any reforms or policy-led changes with regard to property management companies, and, if so, will she update the House on them. (AQT 526/22-27)

**Dr Archibald:** I have had quite a bit of correspondence on management companies from Members. I am sure that many of us have received concerns from constituents about them. I have raised the matter with officials and asked what can be done. As the Member will be aware, there are different responsibilities for the issues across a number of Departments, but I have asked officials to look at the matter.

**Mr Butler:** The Minister may be aware that legislation is passing through Westminster on the issue. Is she aware — this is local to me in Lagan Valley — that, in complex arrangements where there are commercial and residential leasehold properties, the properties are not only impacted on by the management fees, which are outstripping the rates, but are being devalued, meaning that people who are trying to sell their properties have to decrease the value of their property to make a sale?

**Dr Archibald:** I am not aware of the specific issue in Lagan Valley to which the Member refers, but a number of general concerns have been raised in relation to the issue of management fees. I would be happy for the Member to correspond with me in relation to

that issue, and we can get some advice from officials.

## Baby Loss Certificates

T7. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on plans for a baby loss certificate scheme. (AQT 527/22-27)

**Dr Archibald:** The Member has raised that with me on a number of occasions and has considerable interest in the subject. He will be aware that I am committed to delivering the scheme, which will help to recognise the loss that parents feel and, in some small way, to process that loss. I met the Health Minister last Monday to review ongoing work and plans for the next steps for the delivery of a baby loss certificate scheme. I am keen to see that progressed as quickly as possible, and my officials have engaged with officials from the Department of Health on the practicalities.

**Mr Robinson:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she assure the House that the scheme will be delivered by the end of the mandate?

**Dr Archibald:** It is certainly my intention to ensure that it is delivered by the end of the mandate. At the minute, we are scoping options as to how it can be delivered. It is my intention to make it happen as quickly as possible.

## Transformation Programme

T8. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the transformation programme. (AQT 528/22-27)

**Dr Archibald:** The Member will be aware that the public sector across the North is in critical need of investment and reform to ensure that high-quality public services can be delivered efficiently. Transformation will be essential for doing that and for helping to put the Executive's finances on a more sustainable footing. I brought a proposal to the Executive to set up an interim transformation programme on 9 May and to quickly establish the interim transformation board, which is considering proposals for utilising the £47 million of transformation for this year. The board has completed its first-stage assessment, and 47 proposals have been received.

**Mr McHugh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. *[Translation: I thank the Minister for her response.]* Can she provide more detail on the proposals that have been received?

**Dr Archibald:** Of the proposals that have been received, 29 are moving forward, and 18 of those will be included in a digital landscape review. A number of Departments submitted proposals in the digital space, and we thought that the most effective use of money would be to do something on that collectively. A further 11 proposals will move to a second assessment stage. Clearly, the £235 million of transformation funding across five years, which has been made available to the Executive in the financial package, will in no way tackle the magnitude of the issues. I am, however, committed to making the best and most effective use of those resources to develop and implement a model of delivery that will help to stimulate the transformation of public services.

## Cost of Division: Public Finances

T9. **Mr Tennyson** asked the Minister of Finance whether she agrees that tackling the cost of division is key to placing public finances on a sustainable footing and, if so, what steps she is taking to assess and address that cost. (AQT 529/22-27)

**Dr Archibald:** The Member will be aware that we have asked Departments for proposals for using transformation funding. He will also be aware that, as part of the Budget sustainability work, we have committed to looking at all opportunities to deliver efficiencies where there is duplication, to generate revenue and to look at the types of tools that we need to manage our public services effectively.

**Mr Tennyson:** If that is the case, Minister, why did you support an amendment that removed from a motion a reference to the sustainability plan dealing with the cost of division?

**Dr Archibald:** The Member is aware of the content of last week's amendment. I cannot remember the exact detail of it, but I felt that it added to the motion as it stood. We need to do all that we can to put our finances on a more sustainable footing and to deliver the best public services that we can, and those that the people we represent expect and deserve.

**Mr Speaker:** That brings to a conclusion questions to the Minister of Finance.

3.30 pm

## Question for Urgent Oral Answer

### Infrastructure

#### Water Supply

**Mr Speaker:** Patsy McGlone has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister for Infrastructure. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will automatically be called to ask a supplementary question.

**Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of recent reports and public concern regarding the taste and odour of the public water supply, to update the Assembly on measures being taken by NI Water to resolve these issues.

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure):** NI Water's number-one priority is the quality and safety of your drinking water. I am aware of a number of customers who have reported a taste and smell in their drinking water supply in specific areas. This is related to increased algae levels in Lough Neagh that contain naturally occurring compounds that may cause an unpleasant taste and smell even after going through NI Water's robust treatment process. NI Water is working to reduce the impact of those compounds as they move through the water supply system and is working closely daily with the drinking water inspectorate (DWI) and the Public Health Agency (PHA) to ensure that the water is safe to drink. I can confirm that NI Water has confirmed to me that the water is safe to drink. Processes have included enhanced sampling of the network treatment works, the distribution network and customer taps.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a Aire, as bheith anseo leis na freagraí a thabhairt dúinn. *[Translation: Thank you, Minister, for being present to provide us with answers.]* I had numerous reports at the tail end of last week about foul tastes and odours from the water supply. Young mothers are afraid to give it to their babies through the food that they are providing. I have had a lot of calls about foul taste and foul odours; indeed, I found it in the tea and coffee as well.

Can the Minister say today, if he has the information with him, whether additional or extra

chemicals have been added to the water supply? If so, what are they? Secondly, the Minister mentioned the testing mechanisms: what testing is being done, where and how often to ensure the fitness of the water for human consumption?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Let me emphasise this again: NI Water has confirmed to me that the water coming out of our taps is safe to drink and use. My home is impacted on by this. I use the water in my home and have young children, and I obviously do not want it to impact on my health. I accept that there is an unpleasant taste and smell for drinking-water purposes. Some people may wish to have bottled water or other water for that purpose. For all other purposes, the water is safe, and it is safe to drink as well.

As for which chemicals are used, I will follow up in writing to the Member. NI Water has a very robust regime in place to ensure that the water that comes out of our taps is safe to drink. I recently visited one of its water treatment processing plants and was impressed by the nature of the studious activity that was going on to ensure that we are supplied with clean drinking water daily.

The strong taste and odour that people are getting at the moment is not from a chemical but from a naturally occurring compound in the water. It is a timely reminder to us all, if we needed it, that we need to look after our natural resources. We need to look after Lough Neagh. We need to ensure that the action plan that was published by the AERA Minister is advanced and enacted and that we tackle not just the years but the decades of neglect of Lough Neagh. While algae continue to bloom on the lough, NI Water faces considerable challenges in producing clean drinking water for us, but it is producing clean drinking water for us.

**Mr Buckley:** Minister, many of our Upper Bann constituents have faced foul-smelling and foul-tasting drinking water in recent days. You outlined how NI Water has said that the water is safe to drink. If, however, a constituent came to us and said that they smelled, for example, mould from a packet of ham or foul odours from a drum of milk in their fridge, we would not advise them to eat or drink it. How sure can we be that it is not the same with the water? Does the Minister have a timescale for when NI Water feels that it will have the issue satisfactorily resolved?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am satisfied with the assurances that I have received from NI Water on the quality of our drinking water. As I said, my

home was impacted by this, and I am using the water in my home. I accept — I do not dismiss — anyone's concerns. It is a genuine concern: if you turn on your tap and there is a foul odour coming out of it, you rightly ask questions and rightly contact elected representatives and NI Water.

The water is inspected by NI Water. It is inspected and regulated by the independent drinking water authority as well. NI Water is liaising with the Environment Agency and councils in that regard, so we can give ourselves a number of independent assurances that the water coming out of our taps in some areas, even if it has a foul odour, is safe to use.

**Ms Sheerin:** Minister, I know that, like me, you have been working closely with NI Water over the past week or so to alleviate the concerns of all our constituents about the water. You have outlined that the issue is the result of years — decades — of neglect of Lough Neagh, in particular, and that is why we have the situation with blue-green algae and the problems that people are finding with their water.

**Mr Speaker:** May we have a question, please?

**Ms Sheerin:** Minister, will you commit to working with the AERA Minister to ensure that the action plan for Lough Neagh is implemented as a matter of urgency?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I commit to working with the AERA Minister; indeed, the Executive have committed to working with the AERA Minister. I note that the action plan is also referenced in the draft Programme for Government. It is abundantly clear to us all that the abuse of our natural environment over decades is coming back to haunt us. As I said, the ongoing blue-green algae blooms in Lough Neagh present challenges to NI Water in producing fresh, clean drinking water. We are receiving fresh, clean, safe drinking water through our taps, but we have to take on the challenge of where the odour and smell are coming from. They come from the algae in the lough. That presents huge problems to the environment and biodiversity of Lough Neagh. It is right and proper that other Ministers and I support the AERA Minister in his action plan to take that on.

**Mr McReynolds:** A key part of ensuring that our water is safe to drink is ensuring that the waste water infrastructure operates as it should. What steps are you and your Department taking to work with Northern Ireland Water to improve its waste water treatment sites?

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Member is absolutely correct. One of the causes of the algae blooms in Lough Neagh is foul water entering the lough in too high a concentration and too often. I am working with my Executive colleagues to increase the funding available to NI Water to upgrade the relevant water treatment works. I am looking at changing the legislation on developer contributions. Recently, I also had a policy passed at the Executive to allow me to go forward and draft legislation on sustainable drainage, so that we work with nature instead of against nature in how we separate and deal with storm water etc. That is so that we can store it and release it into the system more slowly than has been the case. When it is released more slowly into the system, it does not overrun at our waste water treatment works. Three steps are at play at the moment. I am thankful that my Executive colleagues are working with me on the budgetary issue. As I say, the other issues are moving forward as well.

**Dr Aiken:** Thank you, Minister, for your remarks so far. You will be aware that, particularly around Antrim and my constituency of South Antrim, there are concerns about the water supply that are linked to what is happening in Lough Neagh. There is a really significant issue of messaging here. How can we upgrade the messaging so that people are not concerned, so that the best messaging gets out there and it is clear that drinking water is safe?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I welcome the opportunity presented by the question for urgent oral answer to, once again, reaffirm that message: water is safe to drink and use. As I said, rigorous tests are carried out on water daily at source, through the treatment stage and at customers' taps. If any customer has continuing concerns about their water, they should report those directly to NI Water. In fairness to NI Water, it will not be able to go to everyone's homes to test water directly from the tap, but it is taking sample tests in the affected areas, and those are being tested as well. As I said, my home has been impacted, and I am using the water. I understand people's genuine concerns — I am not dismissing any of them — but the water is safe to drink.

**Mr K Buchanan:** The press statement from NI Water on Friday indicated that over 40% of the water that goes to homes across Northern Ireland comes from Lough Neagh. NI Water is now dealing with an issue that it has been contributing to for decades: the grey water that flows into rivers each day. Farmers across



Northern Ireland have said to me, "Look at that grey water". To be honest, NI Water is not taking the responsibility that it should. What is NI Water doing to address the issue that it has contributed to and is now trying to deal with?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I put it this way to the Member: we have all contributed to it. We have all taken the lough for granted for far too long, and we are now seeing the consequences of that. What is NI Water doing? NI Water needs the resources and support to upgrade its waste water treatment works, where required. I am working with NI Water to ensure that every penny that we spend is used as efficiently and effectively as possible. I am working with my Executive colleagues to secure further funding for NI Water.

I mentioned the sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) Bill to one of our colleagues earlier. It looks not only at holding back floodwater and releasing it into the system more slowly but at another issue that causes significant damage to our environment: wrong or illegal connections, where foul water runs into storm drains. That can happen if an extension is put on a property, if a washing machine is put in a garage or whatever it may be. The legislation will allow NI Water to work with the property owner, so that either the property owner will correct that connection or NI Water will correct it and charge the property owner for that mis-connection. We are taking a number of steps.

As I said, we have all taken Lough Neagh for granted for far too long. We have to stop doing that.

**Mr Blair:** The Minister mentioned discussions with Executive colleagues, and I understand that. Will he tell us as precisely as possible about his long-term plans to ensure that Northern Ireland Water has the funding that it needs to upgrade the waste water infrastructure and address the problems with Lough Neagh? What measures are being considered to achieve that?

**Mr O'Dowd:** As I previously outlined, working with my Executive colleagues is part of the long-term plan. Unfortunately, we have been dealing with one-year Budgets over a period, which makes it difficult for a Minister, the Executive or, in this case, a government-owned company to plan for the future with real certainty. Hopefully, that will change after the current spending round.

Working with nature is also a way forward. We will need hard engineering solutions; there is no

question about that. We will need tens of millions of pounds to put those hard engineering solutions in place, but we also have to work with nature and ensure that we use it through SuDS or other measures to contain the deluges that we face as a result of climate change. We will work on legislation and see whether we need to change legislation and what that will look like to allow for developer contributions to waste water treatment works, pumping stations or whatever it may be. We need to ensure that houses, factories and schools are built, and that they are connected to a system that is safe, secure and environmentally robust.

**Mrs Erskine:** I thank the Minister for coming to the House today. We know that the system needs to be significantly upgraded and that we have more pollution incidents per kilometre of pipework in Northern Ireland. As the Minister said, the prioritisation of clean drinking water is important. Capacity in our system is also an issue. Will the Minister tell us, in light of the Programme for Government, what detailed discussions have been taking place about the investment strategy on our waste water treatment and the timelines for that to come to fruition?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Any investment strategy has to include an investment strategy for NI Water. It will not work without NI Water having access to the resources that it requires or that can be delivered during an investment strategy period. Those discussions are ongoing.

### 3.45 pm

In fairness to my Executive colleagues and the main players in the debate, everyone recognises that NI Water needs more resources, but it is competing against Health, Education and all those things. We have to work together to map out a way forward. As I said in response to a number of questions today, there is a three-pronged strategy: having more direct investment in NI Water, seeing what new legislation on developer contributions might look like, and working with nature through programmes and the provisions in the SuDS Bill.

**Mr O'Toole:** Minister, I welcome your clarity on the safety of the drinking water and your commitment to the Lough Neagh action plan, but there is, with the greatest respect to the Minister involved, a lot of inaction in the action plan. There is not a huge amount of clear legislative or financial commitment. You said that there was independent assurance about

the water, but the truth is that we do not have independent assurance, because we do not have an environmental protection agency. Will you join the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister to do all that you can to ensure that that one deliverable thing is included in an updated Programme for Government?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Let me be clear: there is independent assurance about the water. NI Water does its tests; the independent drinking water inspectorate carries out tests; we work with our colleagues in NIEA who carry out tests; and local councils can carry out tests. The water is robustly tested to assure citizens that, if they are connected to the public system, it is safe to turn on their tap and that clean drinking water will come out of it.

I am happy to support an independent environmental protection agency. To be perfectly honest, I do not know what role such an agency would have in testing water. It may be another layer, but if that would assure the Member, let us have another one. I am satisfied that there is sufficient independence around the testing of our water quality for me to stand here and reassure our constituents and myself that we can use the water that is coming out of our taps.

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Minister for that, because it is really important that our constituents hear that reassurance. The problem that has occurred is a particular one, and my colleague asked for a timescale for resolving it. Does the Minister have such a timescale?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I suspect that it will depend on the weather. I understand that we are in for a number of mild days. Mild weather encourages algae blooms in the lough, which last for a period of time. That means that we have to deal with that when we take water out of the lough through our water treatment works. I cannot give you a timescale. A reduction in temperature and, unfortunately, some rain and wind are required to break up the algae blooms. That will allow us to move ahead and take water out of the lough without such an input of algae blooms. We will, however, come back to this next year and in the years after that. Even fully committing, as I do, to the action plan published by the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister, we are involved in a long-term challenge here. We all have to recognise that. As I said, it might be a timely reminder to us all that we cannot take Lough Neagh for granted.

**Mr Tennyson:** Minister, on a number of occasions, you referred to a proposal that would mean that developers might contribute more. Will you put some meat on the bones of what that proposal would look like? Will you also consider an independent review of the funding and governance arrangements of NI Water as part of that work?

**Mr O'Dowd:** On the first point, under the current legislation, developers cannot make significant contributions to waste water treatment works etc. I am looking at the legislation to see whether we need to amend it through primary legislation. I do not have a definitive policy position or legislative outline at the moment. If we go down that route, it will have to go through the Committee and the Assembly.

We can set up an independent review of the funding for NI Water, but it will not solve the problem within the time frame that we need to solve it. The equation is quite simple. NI Water needs more money, so you can go down a number of routes to get it. You can privatise, which the Executive and the Assembly are opposed to. You can mutualise, which would lead to domestic water bills, and, as far as I am aware, most of the parties in the Assembly, if not all of them, are opposed to that. You can fund NI Water through direct taxation, which we do with the funds that are available to the Executive. You can look at developer contributions and at working with nature. As I said, I have a three-pronged approach to the matter. We are not sitting back hoping or crossing our fingers. My Executive colleagues are on board, the legislation is being looked at and the Executive have passed a policy paper allowing me to draft legislation on working with nature and correcting those misconceptions that are also causing so much damage to the system.

**Mr Bradley:** Minister, your Department is not solely at fault for the state of the water; other Departments are at fault too. Everything that goes into Lough Neagh comes down through Coleraine, where it is pumped into our reservoir. A gentleman left into my office two samples that he wants tested. Thank you for your assurances on the drinking water, but I maintain that I will keep on drinking bottled water in the meantime. What plans do you have to have discussions with your Executive colleagues to plant more trees and shrubs along river ways to soak up the run-off before it gets into the waterways? That is notwithstanding the direct pollution that is caused by, in some cases, government agencies.

**Mr O'Dowd:** On the point about water testing, I suggest that it is probably best if customers allow NI Water to take the water directly from the tap. If you put it into a container, the container may already be contaminated with another substance. The longer that it sits, the higher the chance that it may upset the testing. So, if a customer has concerns, it is probably best if they contact NI Water directly and samples are taken at source.

You are spot on about planting trees and working with the network of streams and rivers and about the run-off that comes into Lough Neagh from a very wide geographical area. That goes back to my point about working with nature rather than against it. I note that the action plan includes proposals on that. I also note and welcome the work of organisations such as the Lough Neagh Partnership, which works with farmers along the lough shore and has been carrying out great work for many years there by fencing off areas, keeping cattle away and planting trees. You talked about planting bushes and shrubbery. As I said, there will have to be hard engineering solutions in and around the lough and elsewhere, it has to be said, but there are also solutions in nature that we need to explore.

**Mr Durkan:** The problems with our water and waste water systems are manifold and multifaceted. They are harmful to the environment, they are, potentially — I am grateful to hear on this occasion that they are not — harmful to health and detrimental to development. Subsequent to Mr Tennyson's question about the Minister's proposed legislation on developer contributions, I will say that developers make contributions at times along with planning applications. Does the Minister see this as an extra layer or an extra opportunity to extract more money out of developers in order to update the antiquated system?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I see this as a solution, and it is the job of a Minister to bring forward solutions. Any legislation that I introduce will have to go through, first, the Executive and secondly, the rigours of the Assembly. One of those rigours will be the Committee. The Member is absolutely right that developers can make contributions, but those contributions are for separating foul water from storm water. In many of our areas, we have an antiquated system whereby we bring storm water and foul water through the same pipes, and that leads to the overrun that is in many of our waste water treatment works. Developers now can pay for

the separation of those waters where it suits the solution in that area. I am talking about broadening that and allowing developers to do it. You can put whatever terminology on it that you like. It is not about me poking developers in the eye, by the way. It is about me bringing forward proposals in the recognition of the stringent financial circumstances that the Executive are under.

When I look at Labour's plans for cutting further billions from public spending, I can sit back and moan about that — I am very good at moaning — but I can also look at solutions, and this is part of my proposals around those solutions. It will hopefully allow houses, factories and schools to be built. At the end of the day, a developer will have to make a decision as to whether it is commercially viable for them to do so, as each one will have a separate cost to it, but the Assembly will have the final say on it.

**Mr Speaker:** That brings to a conclusion the question for urgent oral answer. Members should take their ease while the Deputy Speaker takes the Chair.

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

## Ministerial Statements

### City and Growth Deals Funding Commitment

*Business resumed.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** We will now resume questions on the statement from the Minister of Finance, which started before Question Time and the question for urgent oral answer. The next question is from Philip McGuigan.

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Minister for her statement and for the work that she did over the weekend that brought a result for Derry City and Strabane District Council. There can and should be no differentiation in the growth deals and the positive benefits that they bring to citizens and ratepayers across the North.

I concur with the Minister's comments in her statement that the British Government must immediately change their decision to pause the remaining growth deals, including that of Causeway Coast and Glens, which covers my constituency and that of the Minister. Is the Minister aware of any formal communication from the British Government to the city and growth deal partners?

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for his question. I am well on record at this point as saying that the handling of the matter by the British Government has been atrocious. I am not aware of any formal communication between the British Government and the deal partners, but there was a call with the NIO on Friday to inform it about the pause. The haphazard approach that we have seen in relation to the matter has led to unnecessary confusion, concern and stress for all involved in the city and growth deals. It was a decision by the British Government, and, therefore, it was for them to formally communicate that.

My officials have been in constant contact with deal partners over the weekend. The handling of it has been absolutely terrible. I have spoken to all the chief executives of the impacted councils over the weekend or this morning and assured them that I and my officials are doing what we can to resolve the situation immediately.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Minister for her statement and share her anger and disappointment about how this has been handled by the Labour Government. What

assurances has the Minister received, particularly in relation to the Londonderry and Strabane deal, which has now been unpaused? What assurances has she been given that it will not be paused again in the future and that what has been committed to will be delivered?

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for his question. The communication that I have been given in relation to Derry and Strabane is that it will go ahead and the deal signing will go ahead. That is the extent of the communication that I have received. I am still pressing Treasury for formal communication. Derry and Strabane is one deal partner, but those who are still affected by the pause have a lot of questions, and there are a lot of things that we still do not have clarity on that we are trying to get clarity on.

**4.00 pm**

**Ms Mulholland:** Thank you, Minister. Given the comments by other parties, I find the creation of a hierarchy of urgency when it comes to the four different deals really problematic. The heads of terms for the Causeway Coast and Glens growth deal has already been signed with the NIO. It is not quite as far along as others, but that is the fifth-most-deprived council area in the UK, so there is a sense of urgency. It is a particularly rural area. Minister, is there anything around the rural aspect of these deals? Is there anything that we can do to protect rural communities from being disenfranchised by the decisions to pause the deals in the two most rural areas?

**Dr Archibald:** I share the Member's dismay at the hierarchy and the fact that we have a disparity in approach. It is absolutely unacceptable, and I will continue to make the case that it needs to be rectified. City and growth deals are intended to do all of those things around addressing regional disparities: driving and boosting local economic development, creating jobs and redressing the deficits that exist. Those are some of the points that I made to the Chancellor on Thursday about why the delivery of these projects is necessary and why the commitment must stand. I will continue to make that case. I will speak to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Secretary of State later this afternoon to relay that message again about the need to unpause the other two deals as a matter of absolute urgency. They cannot wait until the end of October.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Minister for her remarks so far. Less than a week ago, I was at Oxford

and listened to the Secretary of State, who talked very clearly about the great approach that we are taking and the expenditure that we are going to make. He actually talked about the approach to city deals. Then, less than a week later, we are beyond this. Minister, you used the words:

*"We need to reset the reset",*

which is something that I firmly agree with. Will you ask the Secretary of State, when you speak to him today, what he is going to do to rebuild confidence between the Northern Ireland Executive, the people of Northern Ireland and this Government, who do not seem to know what they are doing? It is unacceptable and it is not something that we should be having to deal with in this day and age.

**Dr Archibald:** I have reflected on that over the weekend and do not think that this is how we should do business. There needs to be a reflection, at this point, on how things have been handled over the past couple of days. This Government have done a lot of talking about rebuilding relationships. We now need to see actions that match up to those words. Certainly, I will make that point and emphasise that confidence has been damaged by this episode and needs to be rebuilt.

**Miss Hargey:** Thank you, Minister. Instead of resetting relationships, they have unsettled them over the past couple of days, and that is unfortunate. It is good that the Minister is being proactive with the deal partners. We know that the Derry and Strabane deal is due to be signed this week to go ahead. At what stage are the other deals, and what is the impact of any delay on those around the momentum that has been built?

**Dr Archibald:** The Belfast region city deal, as the Member will be very well aware, was signed in December 2021. Twelve legally binding contracts have since been signed, and a further three of those are expected to be signed in 2024. Planning permission had already been granted for some of those projects as well. You mentioned that Derry and Strabane District Council has made excellent progress in developing projects for its city deal. It is now due to hold an event in the Guildhall on Wednesday to officially sign that deal. It is at the financial deal-signing stage. Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council signed heads of terms on 24 April, and preparation is going into the outline business cases to progress to the next stage of the financial deal signing.

Obviously, as I said, the fact is that the pause in the funding commitment will damage confidence and the momentum of that project. That is why it needs to be rectified immediately. The Mid South West growth deal has also been making excellent progress and the deal partner was preparing to sign the heads of terms in late autumn. Again, I will press the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Secretary of State for clarity on the funding commitments for that deal and, again, stress that the pause should be lifted as a matter of urgency.

**Mrs Erskine:** I thank the Finance Minister for her answers so far. The Minister will remember that one of her first actions after taking office was to agree extra funding for the Enniskillen A4 southern bypass. A further £12.5 million was to come from the growth deal. That infrastructure project has been talked about in my constituency for four decades. Drive through Enniskillen any time, and you will see that the project is needed. Does the Minister, working with the Infrastructure Minister, remain committed to progressing the A4 Enniskillen southern bypass in light of the Government's pause on city and growth deals?

**Dr Archibald:** The Member's question points to the difficulty that the pause on the funding commitment has created. There is a range of projects right across the North on which delivery is critical, and now there are question marks over some of those projects. I will work with the Infrastructure Minister and all Executive Ministers to understand where we are with individual projects, but we need to get the pause lifted as quickly as possible so that we can put certainty back into the delivery of those projects and ensure that there is not a loss of confidence. A lot of people out there have angst and concern about whether projects will be delivered, and I am not in a position to answer their questions, because I do not have clarity on a lot of them. We need that clarity as a matter of urgency.

**Mr Tennyson:** Minister, are you aware of any precedent for investment on such a scale being pulled or paused without consultation with the Executive? Do you agree that, for a Government who talk up their economic credentials, their behaviour over past days would put their Tory predecessors to shame?

**Dr Archibald:** I am well on record at this point about how deplorable the actions of the past days have been. The answer to the first part of your question is no, I am not. It is outrageous that we are in that situation. We need that to be

rectified as a matter of urgency, because those projects will deliver economic development, create jobs and provide infrastructure investment. I made exactly those points to the Chancellor. She talks about a growth agenda; the city and growth deals will deliver that. We need to see them back on track.

**Mr Gildernew:** I thank the Minister for her statement. I share the dismay of the Minister and every other Member at the manner and content of the announcement. The Mid South West deal impacts on my whole constituency. Over the weekend, people from Dungannon and south Tyrone who have been working diligently on plans and improvements for our area, in the expectation of and with the promise that there would be funding, have been left unaware of what is going to happen. What type of projects will be impacted on by that announcement?

**Dr Archibald:** I share the Member's concerns. I spoke to the Mid South West chief executives earlier, and I understand and feel their frustration, given the effort that has gone into developing those projects. The British Government's funding, for the most part, goes towards innovation and digital projects. They are, again, the projects that will be game-changing in economic development and boosting jobs and local economic activity. For example, in Causeway Coast and Glens, the British Government were funding the Bushmills innovation and incubation hub; the centre for drug discovery, biofood and pharmaceutical innovation; and a food innovation and incubation hub. The private sector, along with the universities, has put a lot of development and interest into those things.

In the Mid South West deal, it is projects such as the agri bio innovation centre, the Mid South West innovation programme and the green energy pilot. Those are the projects that the British Government are supposed to be funding. They are really exciting and innovative projects, and we need the pause to be lifted as soon as possible, so that everybody can get back to ensuring that they are delivered as quickly as possible and so that Mid South West can get its heads of terms signed.

**Mr Brett:** I pay tribute to all parties in the House that worked together to try to ensure that the deals were reinstated. I know that, moving forward, all will continue to work together to ensure that the other two are unpaused.

Speaking of paused funding, the Finance Minister may be aware that, as part of the

announcement, the Labour Government have also paused £2.5 million under the Levelling Up Fund for Crusaders Football Club, in my North Belfast constituency, to deliver a skills centre that would have tackled educational underachievement in one of the most socially deprived wards in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister commit to raising that important issue with the Secretary of State to get the funding back on track in order to deliver that much-needed project?

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for his comments. There has been a unity of purpose shown on the issue, and that is to be commended. It has helped us get to the position that we are in now, but we have a way to go to ensure that the funding committed to the Causeway Coast and Glens growth deal and the Mid South West region growth deal are delivered.

I was not aware of the specific issue that the Member has mentioned, so I am happy to raise it for him.

**Ms Egan:** Minister, I agree with you and everyone in the Chamber that the UK Government's handling of pulling the funding for the city and growth deals is absolutely atrocious. My constituency of North Down was due to benefit from the Belfast region city deal. Can you confirm for my constituents that the Bangor waterfront project will go ahead? Do you agree that the redevelopment of its seafront is vital for the regeneration of Bangor city centre?

**Dr Archibald:** The communication from the Secretary of State is that the status of the Belfast region city deal is unchanged. That is the extent of the communication that I have had. As I said to Deborah, we need to get clarity on all those matters, and I am still waiting for that formal communication to set out the exact status of each of the city and growth deals. The project that the Member referred to is hugely important for her constituents, in the same way as a number of projects that we will all point to into which local partners have put a lot of time and effort through development proposals and investment. We need to see the assurances for each of the city and growth deals and the pause lifted on the two that remain paused.

**Mr Gaston:** I have been involved in the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council projects since the work on the Belfast region city deal started eight years ago. If the Causeway Coast and Glens growth deal and the Mid South West

region growth deal do not proceed in the current time frames, or, indeed, do not proceed at all, who will reimburse the ratepayers who have already committed money to bringing projects to their current stage? Who will meet the additional costs that may be incurred in future from the pause that we currently have on the two growth deals?

**Dr Archibald:** The Member's point about having been involved for eight years is relevant. So much time and effort has gone into developing projects for each city and growth deal. I am not in the headspace where I accept that there will be a reneging on the funding commitment. The Government need to honour the commitments and pledges that they made on the funding, and, where deals have already been signed, it is only reasonable that we expect them to be delivered. I am therefore not yet in the place where I need to be thinking about reimbursing people. Collectively, we need to make the case for the commitments to be delivered on.

**Ms Sugden:** I thank the Minister for her efforts so far. My comments are similar to those that Ms Mulholland from North Antrim made. Why Belfast and Derry? Why were those two deals allowed to continue? Why have the deals for the other areas been paused? Is there any indication as to why the UK Government have singled out those two areas in particular? It is good that the Belfast and Derry deals can continue, but on what basis was that decision made? Is there any indication of the basis on which it was made?

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for her questions. I share her dismay about the projects, because she and I are constituency colleagues, and we know well the importance of the growth deal locally. I do not know the rationale behind the decision. I can only presume that it is about the progress made. The Belfast region city deal had moved past the financial deal-signing stage, and a number of contracts had been signed. The Derry city deal was getting to the financial deal-signing stage, but that is why we need to make the case for why there can be no disparity among the various deals.

They all need to be delivered. Those responding committed to them all — the British Government, the Executive and other local partners. Therefore, they all need to proceed, and they need to proceed as a matter of urgency. Nobody should be sitting around until the end of October waiting for clarity on that,

because that will undermine confidence in the projects being delivered.

**4.15 pm**

**Mr McGlone:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for her answers.*] Does the Minister agree that it is crucial that a strong message come from her and the Executive that the Executive's commitment to the city deal projects, such as those in the Mid South West region, including my constituency, is rock solid? She mentioned that she had made a request to the Secretary of State. Will representatives of the Executive request an urgent meeting with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury? It is vital. The Cookstown bypass in my constituency is extremely important for the revitalisation and economic development of the area.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Minister, you can take whichever of those questions you want.

**Dr Archibald:** The number of Members in the Chamber this afternoon to ask questions on the topic shows how important it is. I will have a call with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury this afternoon. It is important that we seek clarity around the projects that remain paused. That pause needs to be lifted as a matter of urgency. The Member cited a project in his constituency that needs to be delivered: we all have those projects, and all of them need to be delivered. All of the commitments made in relation to that funding and all of the pledges made — the deals that have been signed — need to be delivered.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Alan Chambers. Sorry, Alan Robinson.

**Mr Robinson:** I am the right Alan. Does the Minister agree that the projects in the Causeway Coast and Glens that are now at risk are absolutely vital to that region? Does she agree that the action of the Labour Government in announcing the pause was an absolutely despicable way to treat the people of the Causeway Coast and Glens region and, more so, the local borough council and its officials? It is a shameful way for elected reps in the Labour Government to treat elected representatives in Causeway Coast and Glens.

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for that question. Like me, he will be familiar with the projects in the Causeway Coast and Glens deal. I had the opportunity to visit Bushmills recently and hear about the plans for the

regeneration project there. There is also Dungiven regeneration and the range of innovation projects in which the university and the regional college are involved. They are all really important in driving forward our economic development, boosting economic performance, creating jobs and supporting businesses and infrastructure development. It is crucial that they be delivered. My feelings about how the whole episode has been handled are well on record: it has been absolutely shambolic. There needs to be serious reflection on the rebuilding of relationships, because they have been seriously damaged over the past few days.

**Ms Forsythe:** I thank the Minister for bringing the subject to the House today. I want to address the chaotic handling of the issue by the new Labour Government and the unnecessary stress that it has placed on our councils, in particular, over the weekend. Does the Minister have a quantification of how much, our councils and Departments estimate, they have invested in project development on each of the city deals to date on the basis of the commitment of £617 million by our UK Government? That total would be a strong way to show the Labour Government how much has been invested in Northern Ireland to date.

**Dr Archibald:** I have figures here on what has been invested in each of the deals over the past number of years. Obviously, the Belfast deal is the most advanced, and funding has been flowing there since about 2022-23. There was £3 million that year and £5.36 million in the following year. In Derry and Strabane, £0.9 million was spent in 2022-23. This year, about £48 million has been spent, of which about £39.5 million is a British Government contribution. In Derry and Strabane this year, £0.72 million is anticipated to be spent on one of the projects, along with £2.7 million on the Derry North Atlantic museum, which is funded through the Executive's contribution to the Inclusive Future Fund.

There has been considerable investment. That is the funding that has flowed from the Executive and the British Government, but there has also been investment from local partners in the development of projects to business case stage so that they are in a position to be taken forward. All of that is put at risk, if there are questions marks over it, and confidence in deliverability is undermined. That is why we need the pause on the two remaining deals to be lifted as a matter of urgency and the funding commitments delivered on.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister. We support the progress of all the projects. As many have stated, the thing has been shambolic. I want to address a point made by another Member who said that there was no hierarchy of need. Actually, there is: the deficits that the city deals were set up to address exist nowhere more acutely than in the north-west, so we are glad to get Derry back on track.

Minister, given the pressures on Executive budgets, how safe is the Executive's commitment of £717 million across the four proposed city deals? Will it remain ring-fenced until the UK Government press "Play" again?

**Dr Archibald:** As the Member will be aware, the city and growth deals are delivered over a number of years, so that funding commitment is over a number of years. As I said in response to another Member, I am not yet in the space of accepting that funding commitments will be withdrawn. That is not an acceptable position for us to be in. The commitments need to be honoured, and the British Government need to live up to the commitments that have been made. The Executive are certainly committed to the delivery of the projects; we expect the British Government to do the same.

**Mr Mathison:** I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber today. Is she able to provide any clarification of whether the uncertainty surrounding the city deal funding extends to projects that rely on access to the complementary fund?

**Dr Archibald:** The Member will be aware that the complementary fund is an additional £100 million that the Executive committed for the three city and growth deals — the Belfast region deal, the Causeway Coast and Glens deal and the Mid South West deal — that are not in receipt of Inclusive Future Fund moneys, which the Derry and Strabane growth deal is. I think that £52 million of that fund has already been earmarked for a number of projects, leaving £48 million still to be allocated. As I have said, I do not accept that it would be reasonable for us to be in a position where the British Government renege on their funding commitments to those two growth deals. I will continue to urge them to honour those commitments and the deals that they have already signed.

I will continue to impress upon the Treasury that it needs to reverse those pauses and the deplorable decisions that have been taken, because there can be no disparity between the deals. To return to Mr Durkan's point, we all



accept the need to address regional inequalities, and Derry and Strabane are right at the top in relation to that. However, all our regions face difficulties. We really need the projects to be delivered in order to drive forward local economic development.

**Mr Bradley:** I thank the Minister for coming to the House today. If the Labour Government continue to cancel finance for projects that benefit citizens, they could go down as the worst Government ever, headed by the worst Prime Minister ever. That is only my opinion.

Minister, you have mentioned some of the nine projects in the Causeway Coast and Glens that are at risk as a result of the Government's decision. Given the importance of the deal to the Causeway Coast and Glens area, will the Minister mount a robust challenge to ensure that the Mid South West and Causeway Coast and Glens areas are not disadvantaged by the Government's divisive decision, that there is equality of opportunity for both areas and that regional inequalities are addressed? I imagine that you will have full support across the Chamber to do so.

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for his question. I am happy to give that commitment. There should be absolutely no disparity in the treatment of any of the projects. It is imperative that the pause is lifted on the two remaining deals as a matter of urgency and that they do not have to wait until the end of October to have certainty. Otherwise, confidence in those projects will be undermined. I have spoken to all the chief executives, and there is such angst, concern and anger about how they have been treated, which needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Minister, you indicated that you became aware of the UK Government's intention on Wednesday. Was the Minister for the Economy also aware of that when he made his announcement and addressed the press at 4.00 pm on Wednesday regarding the expansion of Magee and the report of the task force? If so, was he aware at that point that the content of the report was under severe threat because the majority of the money committed to the expansion at Magee, which is so important, comes from the city deal?

**Dr Archibald:** We became aware of the pause on Wednesday afternoon at official level. It was only on Wednesday evening that I made Executive colleagues aware of it. I cannot answer for the Economy Minister, but I know when I made my Executive colleagues aware of

the news, and it was late on Wednesday evening.

**Mrs Dodds:** There is great consternation about the pausing of the deals across the Chamber but particularly among those of us whose constituencies are affected by the continuing pause in the Mid South West deal. That deal is important to Upper Bann, particularly its agri-food element, because of the large manufacturing base and the rural constituency that we have. We are concerned that the Secretary of State is not aware of the harm that could be caused to the growth in Northern Ireland's economy.

I have to point out that more than the north-west have areas that suffer great deprivation, and I was glad to hear you say that. What will the Minister tell the Secretary of State when she meets him later today about why he should unpaue the Mid South West and Causeway Coast and Glens deals and rectify what would be a great injustice and a great harm to regional equality?

**Dr Archibald:** Thank you to the Member for that. I agree with her about the need for the projects. They will be game-changing in local economic development and the potential for job creation and further investment in local areas. Those are the exact points that I will make to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Secretary of State and that I made to the Chancellor last week. As I said, the Chancellor has talked about a growth agenda, and the projects that we are talking about completely align with that objective, so we need to see them delivered.

The point on the two deals on which a pause remains is well made. That pause needs to be lifted immediately. They need to have the same certainty and clarity as the other deals so that people can get on with their work to deliver on those important projects.

**Mr McNulty:** Minister, city deals are seen as an important catalyst for so many crucial projects and initiatives, with huge effort and cost having already been expended. What are the consequences and costs of pausing the Mid South West growth deal, what impact will that pause have on places like Armagh city and what efforts are under way from you and your Executive colleagues to have those deals restarted?

**Dr Archibald:** As I have outlined in the Chamber this afternoon, I had the opportunity to speak to the chief executives of the three

councils in the Mid South West growth deal area this morning. They relayed to me the importance of ensuring that the pause is lifted as quickly as possible so that it does not damage the progress of the deal or undermine the confidence and momentum that has been built up with so much commitment from local government and private sector partners.

I will continue to make the case that we need to see that pause lifted as quickly as possible and that there should be absolutely no disparity between the four city and growth deals so that people can then get on with actually delivering.

**4.30 pm**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Thank you, Minister, for the replies, and thank you, Members, for the questions. That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two while we change the top Table.

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

## **Executive Committee Business**

### **Budget (No. 2) Bill: Further Consideration Stage**

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call the Minister of Finance, Dr Caoimhe Archibald, to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

*Moved. — [Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance).]*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Budget (No. 2) Bill now. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

### **Standing Order 39(2): Suspension**

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

*That Standing Order 39(2) be suspended in respect of the passage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, Minister. In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated any time limits to the debate. I call the Minister of Finance to open the debate.

**Dr Archibald:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.]* Standing Order 39(2) requires that, in accordance with the 1998 Act:

*"No date may be determined for the Final Stage of a Bill until ... the Speaker has considered the Bill in accordance with section 10 of the ... Act and signified to the Minister ... in charge of the Bill that",*

in their opinion, it may proceed to its Final Stage. That Standing Order ensures that the Assembly, rightly, has time to consider and debate legislation fully. I ask that the Assembly agree to the suspension of that Standing Order in order to allow the Bill to complete its passage in a shorter time frame and for the Final Stage

debate to occur in a week's time on 23 September.

As Members may recall, the Assembly agreed a 65% Vote on Account for 2024-25 on 9 April. That Vote on Account provided finance to allow Departments to continue to provide services in 2024-25, pending the passage of a Budget (No. 2) Bill. When the Budget (No. 2) Bill completes its passage through the Assembly, there are further steps to be completed before Royal Assent is secured. That does not happen immediately. There is a risk, therefore, that Departments reach the Vote on Account limit before Royal Assent is achieved. I am seeking to mitigate that risk. Should Departments reach their cash limits, there is a real risk to the delivery of public services, as it would be illegal for a Department to exceed the voted limits.

There will be an opportunity for the Assembly to discuss in full the issues that relate to the Budget (No. 2) Bill at the upcoming Final Stage debate. I thank Members for their continued support for the Budget and their understanding on the matter.

**Dr Aiken:** Minister, I would not normally have indicated to speak, but one of the issues that we have had recently is with DAERA, which was looking for an advance, particularly on the cash limit. Do you have any indication of whether any other Departments are approaching those limits? That might be germane to the debate, and, for the sake of clarity, it might be appropriate if we were informed of that.

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for his contribution. The urgency of the Bill's needing to proceed to Final Stage is driven by the critical need to secure cash to Departments so that they can continue to deliver vital public services. As the Member mentioned, we recently had to advance funding from the Consolidated Fund to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to ensure the delivery of farm payments. I am not aware of each Department's specific accounting position in relation to its Vote on Account at this stage, but the risk is that, if we do not move to Final Stage next week, it will take much longer to get Royal Assent for the Budget Bill, and Departments will then meet their cash limits. I therefore point out that not agreeing the motion to suspend the Standing Order would jeopardise the delivery of public services. I urge Members to agree to the suspension of Standing Order 39(2).

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** As no other Member has asked to speak, that concludes the debate on the motion. Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*That Standing Order 39(2) be suspended in respect of the passage of the Budget (No.2) Bill.*

## Assembly Business

### Standing Order 10(3A): Extension of Sitting

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I have received notification from members of the Business Committee of a motion to extend the sitting past 7.00 pm under Standing Order 10(3A).

*Resolved:*

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 16 September 2024 be extended to no later than 8.30pm. — [Ms Ennis.]*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Assembly may sit until 8.30 pm if necessary.

Members should take their ease before we proceed to the next item of business.

## Private Members' Business

### Great Britain to Northern Ireland Trade

**Dr Aiken:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly recognises that the role of road hauliers is critical to successful trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland; notes the concerns raised by the Road Haulage Association (RHA) regarding impacts on business-to-business deliveries, particularly around the sanitary and phytosanitary requirements and the turnover threshold for businesses moving goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland; and calls on the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to pressure the Northern Ireland Office and His Majesty's Government to meaningfully engage with all stakeholders in order to resolve the negative impact these matters are having on Great Britain to Northern Ireland trade.*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes.

**Dr Aiken:** Before I start, I am a bit disappointed that neither the First Minister nor the deputy First Minister made themselves available for the debate. As we go through it, we will understand that the issues of trade diversion that we are already beginning to see are significant. Those of us who have the misfortune to sit on the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee, as some who are sitting here do, understand the importance and implication of that word "significant" and what it means.

The road haulage industry is a vital part of the logistics lifeblood of our economy. Without the smooth and timely operation of its services, much of our just-enough, just-in-time supermarket, manufacturing, food and e-commerce services would come to a grinding halt, with massive implications for every sector of life in Northern Ireland. The regular transportation of goods into Northern Ireland from the rest of our nation by ferry and air freight, and in the form of everything from bulk loads to small parcels, is what maintains the so-far-seamless integration and interdependence of our economy with our largest trading partner, the rest of our country, the United Kingdom.

Today, the regular flow of lorries, ferries and aircraft means that whatever we have on supermarket shelves and in our storerooms is the same as that in England, Scotland and Wales and is generally a similar price with similar availability. That so-far-seamless stream has been maintained, but, as of the end of this month, the requirements of the UK internal market scheme — the green lane — will come into force. Of those changes, the logistics industry states:

*"insufficient clarity has been provided about the new arrangements,"*

and that many companies — public and, more forcefully, private — have said to us that it is likely to disrupt trade. It is already disrupting trade. However, the present Government and the previous one stated, quite categorically, that there are to be no disruptions to trade; there is to be a seamless market and there needs to be a seamless transfer. The previous Conservative Government went so far as to state that there was no border in the Irish Sea, despite every piece of evidence showing otherwise, and that seamless movement across the narrow stretch of water between us will continue. The present Labour Government stated that the combination of mitigations, derogations and — to use Secretary of State, Hilary Benn's, words — the operation of the Windsor framework "in good faith" would see that there was minimal or no disruption.

At the end of this month, however, new arrangements will come into force. A quick glance at the government website will show what the new arrangements are. Some would have us believe that there will be only minimal requirements from the end of the month, when there are few or none now, but there will be four categories at the end of the month. Please bear with me on this, Members. The categories for goods sent by a business in Great Britain to a business in Northern Ireland are: business to consumer, consumer to business, consumer to consumer and business to business. I hope that you are following this.

To support those four categories, up to 27 steps need to be taken in order to send goods and parcels to Northern Ireland from the rest of our nation, along with, for good measure, 10 additional requirements to become an authorised carrier and a requirement to register with the UK internal market scheme. You will be glad to know that I will not be reading out every one of the requirements, but suffice it to say that there are a few of them, and I will bring those up.

Some are quite obvious. They include: carrier name; date of delivery; name and address of sender in Great Britain; name and address of recipient in Northern Ireland; number of items; value, where known; parcel reference tracking number; and a six-digit commodity code, which is generated by the authorised carrier based on the goods description — you will be glad to know that HMRC is working with carriers to support them to produce those commodity codes.

The requirements also include: the name of a representative that the carrier will deliver the parcel to; supporting documents, with, where relevant, a reference number for documents such as certificates and licences that are produced in support of the movement; the numbers of the items in a parcel, which has to be done using the sequential numbers of the items contained in each parcel, for example, "1, 2, 3" — I am glad that HMRC spelled that out. They also include: total value of goods in the parcel; amount invoiced; place of delivery if different from the address of the recipient; gross weight of the parcel, with weight limits of individual packages not to exceed 31.5 kg if the parcel contains more than one item, or 100 kg if it contains a single item; and a goods description of each item. Are you following me so far?

You can only use that lane if you follow the 10 requirements of being an authorised carrier. You must be established in the UK, and if you are not established in Northern Ireland, you must have an indirect customs representative established in Northern Ireland. A customs representative, but bear in mind that that is not a customs requirement — or so we thought.

You must have a high level of control of your operations, including through a system to manage commercial and transport records, and you must be able to demonstrate that you can show them. You must be able to determine whether the parcels should follow the B2C, C2B or C2C arrangements using information from the sender of the parcel. You need to collect and provide that data on things like parcel movements to HMRC, based on commercial information that you receive from the sender, collected from shipment postage as purchased, and also for various other goods and delivery systems. All those data requirements are helpfully laid out on a government website, which I could not access yesterday because it had crashed. You will also be required to work closely with HMRC to combat attempts to use the arrangements for consumer parcels for smuggling. HMRC will work with carriers in preparation for tackling this risk.

#### 4.45 pm

All those things that do not happen now are going to happen at the end of this month. I hope that Members have followed all those requirements. Many businesses, including large ones, are incredulous at the layers of bureaucracy and the added administrative burden and cost. Quite frankly, many are not going to bother. This information is never regularly used internally in the United Kingdom, and, for many distributors, it is a burden they are unwilling to carry, given the size of the market here. Indeed, some have indicated that the necessary amounts of information, coupled with the required membership of the new internal market scheme, are more onerous than those required to make customs declarations, which are much more —.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. His point about the layers and layers of bureaucracy further supports the Road Haulage Association's claim about a 30% drop in goods moved from GB to Northern Ireland. Suppliers are looking at this and saying that it is too burdensome for them to deal with. Does the Member agree that dual market access simply does not exist, because there is not as equitable an arrangement for GB-NI as there is for those entering the single market?

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Member for his intervention. The economist Esmond Birnie said recently that there is no evidence whatsoever that there has been an increase for dual market access. If we are going to make this work, we need to get rid of those burdens of bureaucracy.

This is the very real challenge of creating significant trade disruption. That is why the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Economy Minister, if we can prise him from Chicago, and the AERA Minister should be raising these issues. We are less than a month away from the introduction of these restrictions, yet we have not heard from the First Minister and deputy First Minister any words of reassurance or that they are making their concerns known to the Secretary of State or the European Union.

While it is understandable that businesses, including those in the transport sector, do not wish to become involved in this highly charged political debate, the very real implications of these changes need to be understood and explained. The Windsor framework talks about the mitigation of the impact of significant changes. That is why we need to challenge this.

Regardless of the partisan position adopted by some on the protocol, there is no doubt that the implications of the implementation of the Windsor framework, in supposedly good faith, will profoundly impact us all. We call on all MLAs to support our motion.

**Mr Kearney:** The motion would have been stronger and could have been more focused had the text spelt out that the haulage industry here in the North and others face this friction and disruption as a direct consequence of Brexit. Nonetheless, Sinn Féin will support the motion, because it highlights a particular problem facing that industry.

Allow me to cut to the chase. It must be a cornerstone of our power-sharing Executive's policy to represent the interests of all sectors, industries, local workers and families. The Executive must be constructively engaged in helping to find solutions to any and all of the issues that arise. Ultimate responsibility, however, rests with the British Government and the European Union, specifically the European Commission, to reach agreement on all outstanding issues. We need to take every opportunity to influence positively the position of the British Government, to reset relations with the European Union and to minimise the fallout and disruption that are direct consequences of the imposition of Brexit.

**Mr Brett:** I pay tribute to the Members who tabled today's important and timely motion for debate. This is my first opportunity to do so, so I also pay tribute to Lord Elliott of Ballinamallard on his recent elevation to the House of Lords. Mr Elliott will continue to be a strong advocate for the people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and for the people of Northern Ireland, here and in the House of Lords.

The debate gives us all a unique opportunity to come together to send a strong and clear message that we recognise and understand our vital haulage sector's concerns and will all work together to try to find a resolution to outstanding issues. We can, if Members wish, try to rehash and re-debate the Brexit years. We can rehash and re-debate the rigorous implementation years. Indeed, we can criticise our fellow unionists and call them sell-outs, despite having no proposals or achievements of our own. I think that, instead, all the people of Northern Ireland want to see Members in this place work together to get the resolutions that matter to that vital industry and to our economy.

The facts before all Members are very clear. In 2022, Northern Ireland businesses' purchases from the rest of the United Kingdom were worth

£11 billion. That was over double the value of purchases from anywhere else, and, indeed, from all other EU markets combined. The UK is by far our biggest market for external sales. Whether people choose to believe that, it is there in black and white. It is vital that we try to continue to find solutions to the issues that the sector faces. As the Member for South Antrim articulated eloquently, a number of issues continue to impact on the sector, so it is vital that we continue to make progress on them. In the short term, it is vital that the Government, the Trader Support Service (TSS) and industry work collaboratively to identify problems, provide clarity and promote the free circulation of goods within our United Kingdom. As Mr Buckley has already outlined, the Road Haulage Association has been clear that, in the past two years, there has been a 30% drop in trade between GB and Northern Ireland. Building on the point that he made, I will say that the Department for the Economy's own assessment, published earlier this year, made clear that the appeal of Northern Ireland's unique market access may be limited by the extent to which traders are able to access the UK internal market.

It is therefore a problem that all Members face. Yes, we can rehash the old political debates, but let us all work together to continue the progress that has been achieved and to get an outcome that works for everyone in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Honeyford:** We tabled an amendment to the motion to say that the issue is a direct result of Brexit, but it was not accepted. Alliance never called for trade barriers or asked for Brexit. We campaigned against Brexit. At the time, we highlighted what its consequences would be and said that there would never be a good version of it. Since then, we have worked constantly to help mitigate the consequences of Brexit — the hardest of Brexits — that other parties in the Chamber have helped to deliver.

Nevertheless, Members, we need to look at solutions. It is not helpful to highlight problems continually. Forcing everything to be viewed through the lens of a constitutional position may play to a certain gallery, but it is really not helpful to the businesses that need support from us all. This place works best when we all work together. Everything that we do and implement must stand up, in our law and in international law. Every agreement that we have made should be honoured. Alliance has always called for those agreements to be honoured. We are now in 2024, which is eight years after the referendum. We should be looking at achieving solutions for local

businesses. We should be working to support and help local businesses, in which I totally include the road haulage companies.

Steve talked about the green lane. His tone of voice made me think that it was Darth Vader talking about some doomsday thing. We have to mitigate and help, rather than dramatising it and making it out to be something that it is not. We welcome the UK's efforts to try to deliver an ambitious sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) agreement with the EU. That would go a long way to removing the barriers for all our road haulage companies. The sooner that that can be agreed, the better for all of us and our economy.

With Brexit, Northern Ireland lost three of the four freedoms from being in the EU. I regret that we lost the freedom of movement and the freedom of finance and services. We must do all in our power to take advantage of the freedom of movement of goods within the EU. It gives us dual market access. I have said several times that there is a window of opportunity, and we need to seize it. Having access does not mean that you get greater business; you have to move into that. We need to look at how we expand and grow our economy here.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Member very much indeed for giving way. One of the issues that we had recently with, for example, dental amalgam was that a derogation made by the European Union did not have a legal basis. What is the Member's party's position on supporting wider derogation? His party members on the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee have taken a more absolutist route. Do you think that we should be much more open to derogation?

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

**Mr Honeyford:** The Member talks about concerns and keeps putting forward problems, but they are not highlighted by any of the main official industry bodies. That matter is not being highlighted: if you searched for it, you would not find it.

Look at our local economy. It has been said in the Chamber that trade is down. That is absolutely not true. Trade between GB and Northern Ireland has risen overall. Look at the HMRC figures: the absolute black-and-white figures show that trade between GB and Northern Ireland has increased. It is up by 13% from the most recent figures to 2022 to £14.1

billion. You were selling yourself short at £12 billion; it is £14.1 billion. That is an increase of 13% on the year before. When you break those figures down, you see that motor vehicles are up 34%. If you look at minerals, fuels and oils, you see that those are up 55%. However, there are elements of a decrease: miscellaneous edible preparations are down by 32%. I think that that is the one that you were quoting. You quote one figure, but you do not quote the whole vision of what is happening.

We are seeing a change in our economy. Businesses are just getting on with what businesses do, which is supplying their customers, providing jobs and growing themselves. A realignment is happening in businesses. They are taking advantage of different rules. Our focus should be on growing our economy. We have come from a low base. Our focus should be on getting jobs and creating prosperity for people locally. A local haulage company in Lisburn has exploited the situation. The business is looking to expand. It used to come from GB to Northern Ireland. It then changed its model and went to goods from Europe coming to Northern Ireland, and it has now gone back to GB. It is expanding threefold what it is doing. It has signed a contract to supply Marks and Spencer. That is a great news story.

**Dr Aiken:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Honeyford:** I have already given way, and I am running out of time.

You cannot have it every way. You chose Brexit, and you got realignment. Businesses will work. We must bring solutions, not problems. We need to provide solutions and help. Business is way ahead of where we are at politically. We need to move forward and help to make life as easy and streamlined as possible. I totally agree with that. There will always be a bit of heartache at the start, but we need to learn from experience and help to make the situation better.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I welcome today's motion and the opportunity to discuss the crucial issue of trade between Britain and Northern Ireland. I particularly welcome the opportunity to recognise the critical role of road hauliers, who play a vital role in our trade ecosystem and have faced multiple challenges since 2016.

**5.00 pm**

It will be said many times in the debate that Britain is the key trading partner for Northern

Ireland and rightly so, because, of course, it is. It is in all our interests to ensure that the trading relationships between our two islands remain strong and that we work together across the Chamber to break down barriers to trade on this island, North and South, and with our neighbours across the water. Trade sits at the core of our economic prosperity and of the opportunities in our communities.

Since 2018, trade from Northern Ireland to Britain has risen from £10.6 billion to £12.8 billion, although it has not yet fully recovered to its peak of £14.2 billion in 2016. We said many times that it was always going to be impossible to ensure a completely frictionless Brexit, given the magnitude of that ill-fated decision. Its impact has played out in our communities through the loss of funding, which we discussed on the Floor of the House last week; through our diplomatic relationships, which are only beginning to recover; and through the immediate economic shock and the longer-term hit to our prosperity.

In that context, those who are at the nucleus of our trading relationships, including road hauliers, have been forced to contend with new barriers in an unpredictable and changing landscape. Those workers help to literally keep our economy on the road by bringing opportunities and growth to people around these islands. I take the opportunity to recognise their concerns, as well as the work of the Road Haulage Association in dealing with those concerns. I recognise those who have taken practical and pragmatic approaches and sorted out help for their members in navigating the new arrangements, particularly relating to the Trader Support Service.

We also want to support road hauliers by ensuring that there are no barriers to trade across the island. The all-island economy is crucial in supporting the RHA, because the right policy development can align standards between the North and South where possible to support those movements and navigate relationships on these islands, especially during the next phase of implementation of the deal at the end of September.

We always said that pragmatic politics and sensible solutions would be the way to deal with any barriers to trade, not pulling this place down or stopping Stormont operating. We said that that would not help trade, and we can see that it has not. That approach will be complemented, hopefully, by a new approach from the Government in London who have started to build back relationships with our European neighbours and colleagues. Momentum is



building around that approach, and, in fact, it is the only approach to take when dealing with partners across the continent. We need good, close working relationships with all our neighbours. It is in marked contrast to the approach of the previous Government and those who sought to tear up those relationships for the sake of appeasing the most extreme on their flanks. We need the new Government to continue on the path of engagement and dialogue in Europe and to build momentum at pace. That momentum will drive us on a path to trade that is as frictionless as possible. It will also help to ramp up the opportunities that we now have as part of the new set of relationships.

It is always misguided to discuss the real challenges in trade without recognising the unique opportunity that we have now for largely unfettered trade between our islands and with Europe. The goodwill generated by any reset of European relationships must go hand in hand with an acceleration of work in the Department to put in place a dedicated strategy to maximise opportunity, particularly for places like the north-west, which has so much untapped potential.

Colleagues, dealing with those issues requires serious work by the Assembly. It is yet more evidence for why we should be in the Assembly. I hope that we can go forward in that spirit together.

**Mr Boylan:** The issues related to the motion far outstretch trade and are faced week in, week out by our road haulage sector and industry. It should come as no surprise to anyone that the legacy of Brexit has caused disruption to the lives of people who live on this island, and the haulage sector is no different. It is inescapable that the decision to leave has both created and worsened issues for the industry. It has been clear for some time that the number of people in the haulage workforce is miles from where it should be. The Road Haulage Association previously suggested that the workforce needed thousands of people to address those labour shortages. If the haulier workforce was stretched before, the implications of changes to immigration requirements post Brexit have only added to the issues that are being faced today. The ending of freedom of movement has meant that those who might have come here and become a key contributor to the industry no longer have that choice.

In addition to labour shortages and as a consequence of the ending of freedom of movement, haulage companies have experienced a skills gap. There are people who

are willing to work in the industry, but they are not trained or equipped with the skills that are needed. Good work has been done with labour market partnerships and others to ensure that people who are keen to work in the sector are trained so that there is a supply of skilled people to meet the industry's demand. It is, therefore, imperative that initiatives such as employment academies, run through the councils, and other skill-up programmes are available to give people the licences, tests and other skills needed to begin a career in transport and alleviate the shortages faced by the sector as a result of Brexit. That is an area that has seen investment and must continue to do so.

To conclude, our constituents and every other sector across the island rely on the haulage industry, and it is important that the British Government engage with the EU to straighten out the issues that the transport sector faces.

**Mr Middleton:** I also thank the motion's sponsors for tabling it. First, it is important that we acknowledge the importance of road hauliers to Northern Ireland. They are the backbone of the economy, maintaining our supply chains across the United Kingdom and further afield. Our domestic business community relies on them for goods, exports and the movement of materials, and our customer bases depend on them for imports to our shops and businesses. As my colleague Phillip Brett stated, purchases from GB by Northern Ireland businesses amounted to £11 billion in 2022, which was over double the amount procured from the entirety of the EU. That figure, coupled with the pivotal role that our hauliers play in the movement of goods, requires government to listen and act on the concerns raised.

We know that the Road Haulage Association has already been involved in the hauliers' technical discussion group alongside HMRC, Treasury and the Trader Support Service in an effort to address some of the challenges. Outstanding areas of concern include the lack of HMRC guidance on new arrangements for the movement of parcels that are due to come into force at the end of the month; problems being encountered with the Trader Support Service; and a lack of clarity on some products entering Northern Ireland from GB.

The business community often fears uncertainty most. That is something that we are all familiar with, so it is incumbent on us all to work to reduce uncertainty and address legitimate concerns, such as those outlined in the motion. The lack of clarity and guidance on future

arrangements for business-to-business deliveries between GB and Northern Ireland is a concern, particularly for those bringing goods in for commercial processing. Indeed, I had a constituent contact me just last night about challenges their business is having, particularly in relation to Amazon. To bring goods into Northern Ireland, they were advised to use an address in GB and post them from there to Northern Ireland. That is a particular concern for that business.

Equally, the sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) requirements continue to threaten the resilience of the supply chain of food, plant and animal products. There are continuing bans on some plants, which is unacceptable. There remain barriers to the movement of second-hand farm machinery, with unresolved problems continuing for those who attend trade shows and sales.

The motion also identifies issues with the current turnover threshold for businesses moving goods from GB to Northern Ireland. Whilst the Windsor framework quadrupled the turnover threshold below which companies in processing can move goods in the UK internal market system, some larger businesses remain outside its scope and are therefore excluded. That has been exceptionally frustrating for larger businesses whose sole purpose remains within the United Kingdom, which is a grossly unfair situation in which the Government should intervene.

It is clear that, while there has been an improving picture subsequent to the Windsor framework and the Government's 'Safeguarding the Union' Command Paper, difficulties that require resolution remain across many of those economic sectors. I trust that those who for so long championed the protocol will be willing to identify the ongoing areas of concern and work collectively and constructively to support the likes of the Road Haulage Association to see those concerns satisfactorily addressed.

Whilst I note the commitments that the Secretary of State made on 2 September to take:

*"all necessary steps to protect the UK internal market"*

and make progress on the commitments laid out in the 'Safeguarding the Union' Command Paper, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. Continuing barriers to trade within the UK are unacceptable and undermine our economic integrity. It will be for the new Labour Government to put action behind their

commitments on those issues and to prove not only to the House but to the business community and our road hauliers that taking "all necessary steps" to protect our internal market will mean exactly that.

**Ms Nicholl:** I will start by recognising the importance of road hauliers in our economy. The Alliance Party has long maintained that there is no such thing as a good or sensible Brexit for the UK as a whole and for Northern Ireland in particular. It poses huge challenges for our economy, environment, society and political stability, and it is not a rehash; it is reality. However, we now have to make the most of the hand that we have been dealt.

The particular concerns that the Road Haulage Association raised are not detailed in the motion, and the Member who moved the motion highlighted that insufficient clarity has been provided regarding green lanes and the potential disruption to trade and the bureaucracy that they entail. The truth is that it is impossible to entirely square the circle of the challenges and contradictions that Brexit poses and to completely avoid friction and new bureaucracy. That said, the gaps can be reduced significantly through trust and creativity. We must be open to maximising flexibilities within those special arrangements so long as they meet the tests of protecting the Good Friday Agreement and preserving dual market access and any changes are mutually agreed between the UK and the EU in line with our international legal obligations.

While the Alliance Party supports the special arrangements provided for under the Windsor framework, we want to improve the implementation and support people and businesses in Northern Ireland to adapt. Top of our list is a negotiated veterinary medicines agreement and a grace period for the next phase of goods labelling in the interim. An SPS agreement needs to be bold and ambitious enough to meet UK and Northern Ireland needs; it cannot just be a tick-box exercise. If it is done right, as my colleague said, it will go a long way to address problems. We also want to see improved information and assistance to businesses based in Great Britain regarding trading in Northern Ireland. We know that the trader support scheme needs improvement. It is clunky, but it needs to stay.

Early and enhanced engagement between Northern Ireland's elected representatives, Departments and other stakeholders in the development of EU law will be vital in helping all those who work in that space. We must recognise the concerns of our businesses, but

we must also work together to improve the operation of the Windsor framework and ensure that Northern Ireland remains —

**A Member:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Nicholl:** — a great place to live, work and invest. I am finished.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** OK. That was interesting. Thank you, Kate.

**Mr O'Toole:** No doubt, I will have the opportunity to take interventions during my speech. I do not intend to speak for all that long.

I have spent many minutes, perhaps even hours, on my feet in the Assembly Chamber talking about Brexit, and our post-Brexit arrangements, in many ways, is what brought me into politics in the first place.

### 5.15 pm

There are a few specific points that I want to make, some of which have been covered by Members who spoke previously. I share some of Declan Kearney's insight into the motion. I agree with some of the thrust of the motion, but it is strikingly absent in a few key areas. Nevertheless, in the spirit of goodwill and a collective spirit of making representations and trying to get the best possible outcomes for all our businesses, we will not be dividing on it. I hope that some of the things that are aspired to in the motion are acted upon.

I will make the point that we are able to debate this motion. We are able to allow it to go through, presumably without a Division, because — shock horror! — we have a Northern Ireland Assembly, here and sitting, in which people who are elected to speak for the workers, people and businesses of this society can come to this Chamber and talk about issues facing businesses. Those issues include disruptions to trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We were not able to do any of that for nearly two years after the 2022 Assembly election. It just goes to show that, if you stand for election, believe in devolution and want to use your mandate, the place to do it is in this Chamber. Collapsing the devolved Government will not help anyone. That point has to be made again and again. I know that it is probably not comfortable for Members across the Chamber to hear that, including Members who very enthusiastically advocated Brexit, but it is true.

To come to the point about GB/NI trade, it is important to say a few things. First, it is not a churlish or facetious thing to say that the process of what is called hard Brexit — ie the UK leaving the single market and customs union — is, by pretty much any standard, the single biggest erection of trade barriers that any modern state has inflicted upon itself. That is the starting point. There is no example since the Second World War — none that I am aware of — of any major economy deciding to effectively impose a form of low-level or quite high-level economic sanctions upon itself, so there will be consequences. The movement of goods will become more difficult. It is also true that the movement of not just goods but services and, indeed, in many ways, unfortunately, possibly people has become more difficult on this island. It is often said that there are new barriers to trade across the Irish Sea — there are some; I wish that that had not happened — but it is also true to say that people who trade in services across the island of Ireland have seen new barriers and new disruptions. There are new regulatory divergences in the present and, potentially, in the future. I would have liked to see those reflected in the motion.

The motion specifically talks about a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement. I would have liked to see the motion be slightly more specific in calling for the new UK Government to be ambitious in negotiating a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement with the EU. I can see the former Economy Minister. I am happy to give way if she wants to correct me, or, perhaps, she does not agree with me. It would be a huge step forward were the UK to agree an ambitious sanitary and phytosanitary agreement and a veterinary agreement with the EU. I presume that she would like to see that because it would radically minimise the barriers that exist between GB and NI as there would be much less disruption.

We need that because it would be impossible to have separate SPS arrangements on the island of Ireland. No serious person who is involved in agri-food thinks that you could operate two different SPS standards on this island. It is impossible, and I am happy to give way to a single MLA who wishes to stand up and tell me how you can operate two different standards for livestock or plant goods on this island, because there is not one. No one, since 2016, has ever produced a credible example.

We have to have alignment across this island. Whether you are the biggest unionist, the biggest nationalist or the biggest pro-European Remainer, it is impracticable otherwise. We

simply cannot have it. There are cattle that graze in both Fermanagh and Monaghan. Whether you like it or not, there are, so we cannot operate separate standards. The way in which we need to address that is through greater alignment between the UK and the EU. I hope that, in addition to some of the actions that are outlined in the motion being taken, we will start to see people properly get behind closer alignment between the UK and the EU. Of course, the best possible alignment of all is rejoining the EU. I do not think that that is going to happen, but —

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

**Mr O'Toole:** — there is one way to rejoin the EU, and that debate is for another day.

**Mr Gaston:** While I support the motion, I am concerned by the way in which it talks around the presenting issue without actually naming it. While hauliers remain concerned about the operation of the Irish Sea border in the round, the issue that they particularly highlight is their concern about the imminent arrival of the Irish Sea parcels border and Irish Sea green lane customs border on 1 October.

In engaging with the arrival of those new aspects of the border, it is imperative to understand how they are new. First, we have been living in a grace period since the arrival of the protocol, but in 14 days' time, that grace period ends, and the border comes into effect for the first time for business-to-business parcel movements. Secondly, we are confronted by the imminent interaction of the complexity of the new green lane customs border with the existing red and green lane SPS border and red lane customs border arrangements.

The lives of hauliers are being made impossible by the fact that, notwithstanding the imminent arrival of the Irish Sea parcels border and green lane customs border, on many points of process detail, they remain in the dark. Many months ago, they sat down with the relevant officials and pointed out that, the previous time they sought to introduce a customs border, on 1 January 2021, the hauliers were informed in detail about the new process only the day before. Yet, here we are, just two weeks away, and while they have some information, the hauliers remain in the dark on many key questions of process detail.

In the context of the limited information that has been made available to them, hauliers are particularly disturbed on two levels. The first of

those is the failure of the Government and the Trader Support Service to understand that the interaction between the red and green lanes is generating growing complexity, which is entrenching rather than qualifying or removing the sense in which the border is an obstacle. In the real world, lorryloads are mixed and potentially subject to multiple procedures, depending on whether they are red lane SPS, red lane customs, green lane SPS or green lane customs or parcels. As one haulier commented:

*"We are creating the most complex set of customs arrangements anywhere in the world, with global customs processes imposed on a small-region economy relying on just-in-time services to keep business moving."*

Secondly, the Government seem to think that they can rely on hauliers to extract detailed information from traders moving parcels and negotiating the customs green lane border, which is extraordinarily time-consuming and expensive. The hauliers' point is that if the Government wish to extract large amounts of information from traders, it is the responsibility of the Government to get that information. It is concerning that some traders have decided to stop trading with Northern Ireland because the data requirements are too burdensome.

At the end of January, the DUP leadership told the people of Northern Ireland that it had secured a significant advance on the Windsor framework, which the party had rejected as unacceptable. Gavin Robinson told us, "The green lane is gone", and, on 8 April, he told William Crawley that its removal would begin in the autumn. However, what we see is not the removal of the green lane border but the next stage of its arrival in 14 days' time.

As the final grace periods come to an end, when it comes to the border, nothing from the Windsor framework has changed in any shape or form. It is just the Windsor framework, which, through EU regulations 2023/1231 and 2023/1128, offers the movement of some goods within the UK, GB to NI, on the basis of simplified customs and international SPS border requirements, but does not remove them. That reserves to the EU the right to default to 100% red lane Official Controls Regulation (OCR) if it is not happy.

Implicit in that upholding of the border is the upholding of the integrity of the new legal regime in Northern Ireland and across the island of Ireland as the result of our new colonial status arising from our subjection to

legislation made by a foreign Parliament at which we have no representation. That relates to not just one law or 300 laws but 300 areas of law. October 1 is the day when reality will finally catch up with the current DUP leadership's 'Safeguarding the Union' fantasy. That is when we will discover, as the TUV warned all along, that the emperor had no clothes, and we will see more starkly than ever before that unionists now need to find a new credible, honest, competent, border-literate leadership to deal with the protocol and uphold the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Those in the Chamber who blame Brexit are Brexit deniers. To be clear —

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

**Mr Gaston:** — the problems are associated with the Northern Ireland protocol —

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

**Mr Gaston:** — and not with Brexit, which has been denied to the people of Northern Ireland.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you. I call Lord Elliott to make a winding-up speech on the motion. I advise that you have 10 minutes.

**Lord Elliott:** Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. As always, it has been a useful debate. I will start with two contributions. The first was from Kate Nicholl, and Matthew O'Toole followed that contribution. Both of them talked about the arrangements being mutually agreed between the EU and the UK, and Mr O'Toole highlighted the issue that the UK should be more ambitious about the deal with the EU. I agree totally with both Members. The problem is that it takes two to tango, two to make a deal, and I have witnessed at first hand that, once the UK goes with any sort of deal — maybe the UK is not ambitious enough; I do accept that, Mr O'Toole — the EU rejects it. We did get a deal for human medicines and medical support, and that was very useful and helpful, but we need deals for the likes of animal medicines and medical supplies.

I sometimes think that practical common sense has gone out of the window when we attempt to deal with some of these issues, because there are simplified processes available to deal with them. Very few goods that travel around the world without a barcode or the capability to be tracked electronically. Why can we not make better use of those systems? Hauliers are very

adaptable, and they will deal with this. It is a huge, complex matter for them, but they are very adaptable, and they will put measures in place. Fair play to them for doing that. The difficulty is that it will come at a cost to businesses and to the economy and a significant cost to the consumer, because that is who will pay for it in the end. It worries me that some companies have already told customers in GB that they will not send goods to Northern Ireland. It will not be a matter of trying to get the goods: we will not be able to get them at any price, because they will not be sent here. There are bound to be more practical and realistic arrangements that can allow those goods to come to Northern Ireland, whether they remain here or go on to the Republic of Ireland. Trade cannot just stop because of what I would term "minor issues", but people make a big thing out of what should be minor issues.

It is a nonsense. We can bring live animals from countries in the European Union, through Great Britain, into Northern Ireland and, maybe, into the Republic of Ireland, but we cannot bring live animals from GB itself. The animals can travel through GB and come to Northern Ireland, but we cannot bring them in from GB itself. It just does not make sense. The next implementation of the region's Brexit deal, or the Windsor framework deal, as I call it, is coming fast upon us, and the Government have not been realistic enough to deal with it in a practical manner.

I will deal with some other contributions. Mr Aiken talked about the new arrangements coming into operation at the end of the month. He outlined the very simple processes [*Laughter*] that we will all encounter. However, it was not simple. It sounded extremely complicated. If anyone can follow it, apart from Mr Aiken, will they please hold their hand up and explain it to me? I will give way for the rest of my six minutes to listen to a detailed explanation.

Mr Kearney highlighted the fact that it is important to have a collective approach when dealing with Windsor framework issues. We all agree with that, and it has been highlighted by other Members, including Kate Nicholl and David Honeyford. I fully agree with the collective approach. Philip Brett highlighted the importance of getting the deals right. The problem is that we did not get the deals right to start with, and that is why we have problems now. I agree that if we can get it right now, that will be of huge benefit, but we are not. There seems to be a breakdown in communication and a breakdown of deals between the European Union and the UK.

## 5.30 pm

David Honeyford highlighted the need to find solutions, but I notice that he nicely dodged the issue of derogations and whether he supports further derogations. If Mr Honeyford wants to clarify his position, I am more than happy to give way in order to allow him to do so.

Sinéad McLaughlin highlighted the unpredictable landscape that road hauliers have to deal with. That is right, but, as I keep saying, they will adapt to it and manage the situation, but their doing so will come at a huge cost, practically and financially.

Cathal Boylan introduced something different from what other Members raised: labour shortages. Accessing a suitable workforce is something that almost every business in Northern Ireland is finding difficult and a strain.

Gary Middleton talked about the lack of clarity on business-to-business deliveries being a major concern. He also highlighted something that I have focused on for a while, and on which I have attended several meetings, which is the difficulty in bringing second-hand farm machinery into Northern Ireland. There are inspections to check whether there is a wee bit of soil still sitting on a piece of machinery that is to come into Northern Ireland from Ayrshire or Yorkshire.

I have already dealt with Kate Nicholl and Matthew O'Toole's contributions.

Timothy Gaston highlighted how we have been living with some of the issues for some time and said that solutions have just not been implemented. That is right, but we have had time to try to find a solution to this issue, and we have not done so. We have not found one, so there is a real need to up the ante. I genuinely hope that the EU and the UK Government, supported by our Ministers, be that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister or other Ministers, find solutions to many of the issues. Otherwise, businesses and road hauliers are not going to be the final problem that we encounter. Rather, it will be the consumer here in Northern Ireland.

I will finish by repeating something that I said near the start of my contribution: common sense needs to be shown on the issues and in our dealings.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly recognises that the role of road hauliers is critical to successful trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland; notes the concerns raised by the Road Haulage Association (RHA) regarding impacts on business-to-business deliveries, particularly around the sanitary and phytosanitary requirements and the turnover threshold for businesses moving goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland; and calls on the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to pressure the Northern Ireland Office and His Majesty's Government to meaningfully engage with all stakeholders in order to resolve the negative impact these matters are having on Great Britain to Northern Ireland trade.*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask Members to take their ease until we change the top Table.

*(Mr Deputy Speaker [Dr Aiken] in the Chair)*

## Dynamic Pricing

**Mr Gildernew:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes the extortionate prices charged for concert tickets as a direct result of dynamic pricing; recognises the lack of transparency around dynamic pricing and the fact that consumers may be unaware that the price of tickets can be increased by 100% of the original purchase price; further notes the role of the Consumer Council in protecting consumer rights and the need for concertgoers to be informed of their rights around dynamic pricing; and calls on the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), as part of its investigation into Ticketmaster, to provide recommendations on how ticket providers and music promoters could be prohibited from engaging in dynamic pricing.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** 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. All other contributors will have five minutes.

**Mr Gildernew:** The motion is about highlighting the need for fairness and transparency for the consumer and the music artist when it comes to the practice of dynamic pricing, which, depending on demand, adjusts the market value of tickets and products. While prices can go down as well as up, I have been contacted recently by constituents who were seeking to buy tickets for the Oasis reunion tour and

ended up paying up to 100% more than the advertised price.

Consumer law is clear: ticket sale sites must be transparent in their dealings with consumers and give clear and accurate information about the price that people will have to pay.

Therefore, I welcome the decision by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to investigate Ticketmaster, and I take this opportunity to encourage people who bought or attempted to buy tickets for the Oasis concerts to participate in that inquiry and have their say.

Rather than entering into a fair transaction, people enter what is, effectively, a lottery process, with the actual price of a ticket not being known until hours after they first entered the waiting queue and are completing their ticket purchasing process. I recognise that dynamic pricing is used in multiple industries and across various sectors, but buying tickets is unlike buying holidays, for example, where an individual can use an alternative airline or resort where there will be a range of flight and accommodation options. Ticketmaster has a monopoly in the live concert market. Thousands of fans have been left disappointed and frustrated by what can only be described as price gouging by Ticketmaster. The hike in costs as a result of using dynamic pricing is not unique to the Oasis concerts or Ticketmaster, but it highlights a growing problem that needs to be addressed to prevent people being exploited.

I acknowledge the massive contribution that musicians, artists, bands and all those involved in the music and arts sector bring to society. The benefits are social, economic and creative, keeping us right at the leading edge of the arts on an international basis and, indeed, allowing us to punch way above our weight in that respect, attracting visitors, goodwill and investment to our island in a way that few others manage. We absolutely need to protect and better and fairly support the sector in order to allow that creativity to flourish and grow. We also need to protect the music fans in working-class communities who helped to launch the careers of artists such as Oasis but are now suffering as a result of these price hikes.

Another major issue is that such eye-watering ticket prices are not reflective of what participants in the wider music industry, particularly artists at a grassroots level, receive. Indeed, the live music industry has encountered significant challenges in recent years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2024 Arts Council research on the working and living conditions of artists here showed that

80% of respondents saw financial barriers as a challenge, 59% did not feel secure in their role, 54% did not feel valued, and over half indicated that they would consider permanently relocating for better career opportunities. That would, indeed, be a sad loss for us all.

We need to see a proactive response to supporting the music industry as a whole, and one that deals with the challenges of dynamic pricing. Therefore, in order to ensure that the sale of tickets is open and transparent, allowing people to make an informed choice before entering the queue in the knowledge that, should they make it to the top, they will be in a position to make their purchase, I urge the CMA to provide recommendations on how ticket providers and music promoters could be prohibited from engaging in dynamic pricing. I ask all Members to support the motion.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Thank you. I call Diane Forsythe. No? In that case, I call Paul Frew.

**Mr Frew:** I have been called many a thing, Mr Deputy Speaker, but Diane is not one of them. *[Laughter.]* Thank you, anyway.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Do not tell me that you are into Oasis, Paul.

**Mr Frew:** I welcome the motion: this is a topical issue, and it is right that the Assembly should debate it. There are times, however, when I believe that dynamic pricing is a good thing. It can add competition, and it could lead to consumers getting a better deal. So, I am not necessarily against dynamic pricing. The issue here — it is referenced in the motion, which we support — is the lack of transparency.

Add in the fact that fans are involved. They are not just consumers; they are fans. What does "fans" mean? It means fanatical supporters. That brings in a completely different dynamic. People who queue up to buy tickets are not necessarily buying tickets for themselves. The chances are that they are buying tickets for their friends or their children, and that is where the emotion comes into it. I agree 100% that, as soon as you hit the button on your computer to enter that queue, you should know exactly the price that you will pay for the tickets. In many cases, it is not just one ticket — it could be up to four tickets. That means a lot of money going out of a family home.

It is vital that the Competition and Markets Authority leads this investigation. As has been stated here, I encourage anyone who has been

affected by the Oasis ticketing experience to feed into that Competition and Markets Authority investigation by this Thursday 19 September. It would be good to hear from all those people. The Oasis ticket experience has been the catalyst for the investigation. However, Oasis is not the only band, and Ticketmaster is not the only company, that uses dynamic pricing. When we talk about fanatical support in the entertainment industry, you can see where dynamic pricing can do damage. There should be an investigation into it and the potential for further regulation.

Businesses should, of course, be able to match supply and demand. I do not think that any of us is talking about regulating an open and free market, but it is not right that you go into a queue or a system where you do not know the price of the product that you hope to buy. That has a massive impact. Imagine a parent trying to buy tickets for their children. After hours and hours of queueing and of their young ones asking, "Are we there yet? Have we got the tickets yet?", they get to the point where they see the cost and realise that it is completely and utterly unaffordable. That could bring catastrophe to a household in more ways than one. The emotion involved, which can build up in young people who need entertainment and want to go and see their favourite bands — their heroes — can do massive damage.

This issue should be looked at. The Competition and Markets Authority should investigate to ensure that people who work hard for their money and who spend their money on the entertainment business — they pay Ticketmaster a lot of money, and they pay bands a lot of money to go to see them — are not short-changed for following their dreams and wanting to see their heroes.

**Ms Mulholland:** Thank you to the proposers of the motion. I really welcome the opportunity to speak on it. This is an issue that I am really passionate about, having worked in a grassroots music venue for years. I welcome the CMA investigation.

Dynamic pricing is not a new phenomenon. It is far more common than people realise. Bruce Springsteen, Taylor Swift and Billie Eilish have all used the practice, but it 'Definitely Maybe' came to light because of the Oasis reunion tour [*Laughter.*] That is one of a number of puns that I will use in this speech.

It was exacerbated by the fact that 50 million people were vying for 1.5 million tickets.

Let us be clear: fans seeing ticket prices rise from £148 to over £350 is not right, and that is less about 'Standing on the Shoulder of Giants' and more about standing on the necks of your working-class fans. The practice prices out the everyday fan and removes their ability to attend multiple events. It begins a slippery slope of making live music totally inaccessible, which is the antithesis of where we want to go in promoting and sustaining our live music sector. We need to see caps on the percentage of seats that are being dynamically priced and a cap on how high a price those seats can be sold at, if we cannot get a total ban.

#### 5.45 pm

A major issue in the selling of tickets for big, arena-sized events is the secondary market, with the likes of Viagogo and other secondary ticket-selling platforms. I want to see more regulation of that element of ticket sales. Scalpers and bulk-buying ticket platforms can falsely inflate the demand for tickets. They need to be called to account and to be heavily regulated, because it is not the band or artist that benefits from that type of ticket sale. Indeed, the only entity to benefit from that type of ticket sale is the platform itself and the bulk-buying platforms that buy tickets with the sole purpose of selling them on at a massively inflated price.

I welcome the fact that UK Ministers have committed to including dynamic pricing in a consultation on ticket resale websites that is due to start this autumn, with an emphasis on transparency and the technology around queueing systems that incentivise price hikes.

While I was speaking to promoters over the weekend about this debate, they told me that they cannot fault the likes of Ticketmaster. Although Ticketmaster holds a 90% market share in this space, I have been told that that is due to its efficiency, scope and ability to handle high volumes, which is why so many promoters, like MCD and Aiken Promotions, use them. However, we need to have transparency, oversight and proper communication with ticket buyers.

**Mr Brooks:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Mulholland:** Yes, of course.

**Mr Brooks:** Will the Member agree that 'Some Might Say' that, when people are being ripped off, it does not matter too much to them whether that is through ticket resale sites or through Ticketmaster and Live Nation adopting the very



systems that touts and resellers have used before them?

**Ms Mulholland:** Thank you very much. I will not get into a tit for tat of —.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** The Member 'Definitely Maybe' has an extra minute [*Laughter.*]

**Ms Mulholland:** It does not matter who is overcharging or where the money goes: if a person is having to fork out an inflated price, it limits the number of live music events that they can attend.

I have to admit that I was misinformed about one element of this until I spoke to promoters. I thought that dynamic pricing was done at the demand of the ticket-selling platform. Whilst those platforms benefit greatly, especially as their booking fees normally rise pro rata — the more expensive the ticket, the more they receive — that practice is solely down to the artists and their management, with ticket sales making up approximately 95% of the artist's fees in some cases. Those huge artists who rely on their diehard fans and fair-weather fans being caught up in the hype to sell out arenas need to realise the impact that it has. In the spirit of the Oasis hype, I encourage them: 'Dig Out Your Soul' and end the practice. I promise that that is the last album name that I will drop in.

During a highly publicised and greatly anticipated tour by a global star, I heard of parents taking out loans and getting into financial difficulties simply to afford tickets to those gigs. Those artists are exactly the ones who can well afford not to engage in the practice, so as legislators and consumers, we should be vocal in discouraging them from doing so.

As chair of the Assembly's all-party group on arts, it would be remiss of me to not bring up the future-proofing of our live venues and the music sector in general. A recent report to the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee outlined several key recommendations to support the live music sector, particularly grassroots venues. No band or artist starts out playing the SSE or Croke Park, and you can be sure that dynamic pricing is not happening in our grassroots venues. Look at the Oasis gigs: £200 million-plus was spent on tickets; £20 million-plus was spent on ticket charges; and £2 million-plus was spent on facility charges and fees. Not a penny of that went into future-proofing our venues. I want to

see something brought in. The Music Venue Trust put an idea out before the election. If £1 from every stadium and arena show in the UK were to go into a fund to be distributed across the grassroots music sector, safeguarding our future, it would serve everyday music fans so much more positively than spending three times the amount on a ticket simply because it is seen to be in demand, whether it is falsely inflated because of bulk buyers, ticket scalpers or secondary ticket platforms.

I welcome the motion, and we will support it.

**Mr Crawford:** Like many across the House, we welcome the motion and will support it.

As one of the new and recently elected MLAs for North Antrim, I look forward to working to promote our creative industries, including our music industries and all the other fantastic sectors that Northern Ireland promotes. This afternoon, I take the opportunity to focus on music ticketing and recognise the remarkable circumstances that have provoked the debate, some of which have been rumbling away for years.

Live events are important not only for Northern Ireland's economy but for the connection and sense of community and well-being that they bring. There is no doubt that, when performances by big artists like Taylor Swift and Oasis are announced, many people get excited and fear not getting tickets due to the demand. A concerned constituent recently reached out to me after she had planned to purchase tickets for the Oasis concert in Croke Park in Dublin. Knowing that the demand for tickets would go through the roof, she had tabs open on her phone and laptop, hoping to secure tickets. After waiting from 7.30 am in the virtual waiting room, she finally got through at 8.10 am to find that tickets that she had expected to cost around £150 on the basis of the presale price had risen to more than £330. With many households feeling a financial burden and, dare I say it, Christmas only a matter of weeks away, many will struggle to justify spending that amount of money on tickets. Additionally, people travelling long distances for concerts may have to factor in a hotel stay for the night. It was reported that, once Oasis tickets had gone on sale, many fans had their hotel rooms in Dublin cancelled and prices tripled.

We in the Ulster Unionist Party understand the economic principles of supply and demand, which are totally different from charging extortionate prices in a way that is seen to be totally unfair. It is an unfair pressure for people who are booking tickets online, believing that

they will be charged one price, to have a few moments to decide whether they would be prepared to potentially pay double. While always encouraging free markets, we must also be mindful of consumer protection, whether in Northern Ireland or in any other part of the United Kingdom.

We want live events ticketing to work in the best interests of Northern Ireland fans. I encourage the Competition and Markets Authority to intervene in order to provide recommendations on how ticket providers and music promoters could be held to higher standards when engaging in dynamic pricing.

**Mr O'Toole:** A good few of my music puns have been taken away, but I will have to 'Roll With It' [*Laughter.*] I will make do.

Obviously, we will support the motion. I, along with many hundreds of thousands — millions — of other geriatric millennials and Gen X people, attempted to get Oasis tickets a few weeks ago. I was one of the people who, while doing childcare not very well — I was neither doing the childcare very well nor securing tickets very well — was pathetically refreshing the screen on the Ticketmaster website, to be told that I was number gazillion in the queue. I did not even get to the point of being quoted some extortionate sum of money. I was number 400,000 or something — it was not 400,000, but whatever it was — while my other geriatric millennial dad friends and I were trying in our WhatsApp group to figure out whether there was any chance of getting to Dublin, whether Oasis would announce a second concert or whether we could go to London. I give that naff little anecdote to show that, clearly, lots of people experienced that issue and lots of our constituents were frustrated by it.

I want to touch on something that Sian Mulholland said. She has real professional experience in this area. Part of the reason why there is such a huge and disproportionate commercial emphasis on artists' live mega concerts and the extraordinary cost of them is that recorded music has effectively become so poorly paid and valueless because of digitisation, the internet and everything else. There is a huge and disproportionate burden on raising revenue and making money from concerts. That means that ordinary, working people are faced with completely unacceptable, extraordinary costs, which is particularly sad, given that Oasis is proudly a working-class band and that many of its fans are ordinary, working people who are now faced with the appalling situation of going to the end of the

queue and getting an extraordinary and grotesque number.

People have talked about the laws of market economics. I will not get into economic theory one way or the other, but, obviously, there is no such thing as a perfectly free market. It is also true to say, however, that, when it comes to the laws of supply and demand and a ticket to see a band that has not played in a long time — there is no other Oasis; they have not played together in 15 years, and theirs is a particular product with a very particular value — the inherent value is based on the connection that fans have with that band. That is why the current situation is so grotesque and frustrating for ordinary people.

We also need to think about the pipeline of new talent. If we do not support grassroots music and working people cannot afford to go to concerts, those people will not pick up a guitar or start to learn the keyboard and will not create live music in the future. The other factor in that is the funding of the arts here, which is abysmal. We would have liked to see in the Programme for Government an aspiration to increase our per capita arts funding, which is extraordinarily poor, including for the live music scene.

We support the broad thrust of the motion, although 'Some Might Say' that it could and, perhaps, should have called specifically on the Minister responsible, who is the Minister for the Economy, to do something about it. It mentions the Consumer Council, which is an arm's-length body of the Department for the Economy, and the Competition and Markets Authority, which is the regulatory authority in London. I hope that, when the reports come back, the Minister for the Economy will be ready to produce 'The Masterplan' — that is for Members who are into Oasis B-sides — for how to deal with the challenge. We attempted to amend the motion to say that. It is a serious issue, and we cannot simply pass motions asking for other bodies to do things without fronting up and dealing with it, where our Ministers and Departments have responsibilities. It is true to say that, given that none of the Oasis concerts will be in Northern Ireland, there is a limited amount that the Minister in question could have done. Ultimately, however, I would like to hear what the Department and the Minister intend to do.

'Don't Look Back in Anger' will be my approach to that, Mr Deputy Speaker. I hope that, when we finally get recommendations from the Competition and Markets Authority, there is a proactive plan to deal with this. I also hope that we are serious and ambitious about properly

supporting live music venues and grassroots music, because, as Sian Mulholland rightly said, you cannot, for ever and a day, separate huge mega concerts and internationally renowned artists from the grassroots music scene; at some point, once that relationship breaks down, there will not be a pipeline. If you make it impossible for ordinary, working people and young people to go to those gigs, you will make it impossible to maintain that healthy pipeline.

**Mr McAleer:** I touched on the issue last week in a Member's statement, so I welcome the motion. While the practice of dynamic pricing has come into focus following the exorbitant prices charged for Oasis tickets, it is not a new phenomenon. It was disgraceful that, a few Saturdays ago, Oasis fans, including me, my children and thousands of others, waited online for hours to get tickets for the gig at Croke Park, only for the prices to rocket within hours and without warning. I was faced with a choice of standing or seated tickets in the range of €400 to nearly €600, which is way beyond the range of my family and of the vast majority of people. Colm made the important point that you cannot go off-peak. There are only two gigs. It is not like when you go to a hotel, choose an airline or pick your time to go somewhere. You cannot go when it is off-peak; there are only two gigs, so you are very restricted.

### 6.00 pm

As I said, while it is not a new phenomenon, the Oasis issue has put a spotlight on it. I know that it has happened with other acts. My colleague Louise O'Reilly TD, who sits in the Dáil, has been highlighting the issue for a while.

In my case, the tickets were not just for me but for my children, who do not understand how the prices rocketed. The bottom line is that you need to know what the prices are before you join the queue. The prices should be advertised, and everybody should have an equal chance to buy a ticket. Dynamic pricing, in my mind, is not that different from ticket touting. The practice needs to stop among ticket providers and promoters. It has left a bad taste in people's mouths. The president of my party, Mary Lou McDonald TD, made the point that working-class people have been thrown under a bus by Oasis. As Matthew O'Toole said, their fan base is mostly derived from working-class communities.

I welcome the Competition and Markets Authority investigation of the sale of tickets for the Oasis concerts. I understand that the issue

is also being reviewed by the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) in the South of Ireland. The CMA investigation will look at the possibility of unfair commercial practice and whether people were given clear and timely information or whether they felt under pressure to purchase tickets, at short notice, at a higher rate than expected. I welcome the call in the motion for the CMA:

*"as part of its investigation ... to provide recommendations on how ticket providers and promoters could be prohibited from engaging in dynamic pricing."*

In conclusion, to anyone who attempted to buy those tickets a few Saturdays ago, 'Don't Look Back in Anger' but share your views with the CMA. That could involve sharing WhatsApp messages or screen grabs. It is important that that is done. There are only three days left — it closes on 19 September — for anyone who was caught up in this and who feels hard done by to take part in the investigation. I commend today's motion.

**Mr Brooks:** I, too, support the motion. I have concerns about dynamic pricing, which seems to be a polished and marketing-agency-approved term these days for price gouging. It is equally important to address the dominance of Live Nation, Ticketmaster's parent company, and its subsidiaries.

I declare an interest, as Matthew did, given that I, too, sat by the computer that day, as did a number of other MLAs. I know that Deborah Erskine and Cheryl Brownlee were on a number of devices trying to secure tickets for Oasis.

**Lord Elliott:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Brooks:** Yes.

**Lord Elliott:** Mr Deputy Speaker, given that everybody else is declaring an interest, I want to confirm that I did not try to get any tickets. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** You have an extra minute, but do not break the 'Wonderwall'. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Brooks:** You will be glad to know that I got rid of most of my puns. I think that we all had a similar idea on those grounds.

A few weeks ago, I sat in front of a computer, watching my hoped-for tickets 'Slide Away'. *[Interruption.]* Yes, that was poor.

Although this is a growing trend in the industry, we should not be focused on just one event — the sale of tickets for the Oasis gigs. Such unethical practices have been more routinely used in the United States for some time and have seen prices for sports and live entertainment rocket beyond the means of many working families. We should learn the lessons of their experience. The practice sees ticket prices fluctuate in real time, based on demand, to maximise the revenue by leveraging the opportunity cost placed on fans during a short, pressurised window. Those who use it point to other industries where similar approaches are used. The Member talked about flights, hotel bookings and Uber, for example. However, few industries can ramp up prices so quickly within such a short window and pressurise people into parting with more money than intended or planned, as a clock ticks in front of them until they lose their chance to buy. It often results in a scenario where the average consumer is unfairly priced out of experiencing live events, or spends beyond what they can afford in a moment when they are deliberately tempted to make less rational decisions. Rather than being a fair market, Ticketmaster's method of gouging creates a tiered system where only those with deep pockets or the fastest internet connections can secure tickets.

If Ticketmaster and Live Nation believe that the long and popular battle to curb ticket touts was about only ensuring that money went to the right people, let me disavow them of that notion: the average punters, our constituents, care that they are not ripped off. They care that the system is fair. Despite the huge efforts put into propaganda against rival price-gouging resale sites like StubHub and Viagogo, Ticketmaster has simply absorbed and adopted the ticket-touting model, saying that it is OK when it does it. If fans are to have their arms twisted up their backs by price gougers, it makes no difference to them whether their hard-earned cash goes to a multimillion-dollar New York Stock Exchange-listed company or an individual tout with similar ethics. I assure those who have paid higher prices for a show that they desire that there is no virtue or solace for us to take in the legitimising of touting practices; no warm fuzzy feeling because those practices are now controlled instead for the profits of companies like Live Nation. I say that as someone who has bought a ticket from a third-party reselling site for an event that I dearly wanted to see: Luke Combs in Belfast earlier this year.

They say that success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan. I should imagine that, given the numbers of those who are fleeing the ship

of dynamic pricing, there will be little opposition to move to banning in that context. In the case of Oasis, the artist, ticket merchant and promoter all seem keen to distance themselves from their responsibility for the decision to use the method.

I will turn now to the dominance of Live Nation, Ticketmaster's parent company, as I said, and its affiliates, which exacerbates the issues. As one of the largest players in the industry, Live Nation wields unprecedented control over the market. Its stranglehold is not only on ticket sales but extends to venue ownership, promotion, merchandising and artist management. That clearly limits competition and leads to higher ticket prices and fewer options for fans. When a single entity controls so many facets of the events industry, it diminishes any genuine opportunity for smaller, innovative companies to thrive, stifling diversity and creativity. Given the relative economies of scale, I think that the dominance is even more pronounced here in the UK and Ireland than in the US, but I do not have the stats at this stage to back that up.

The merger and acquisition practices of Live Nation and its subsidiaries are not merely about growth; they are about monopolistic control. Such concentration of power leads to higher costs for consumers, reduced choice and a market that is driven more by profit margins than by the celebration of live arts and culture. The US has recognised that. Live Nation faces an antitrust case that has been taken against it by the US Department of Justice. We should see similar action from the UK Government and relevant competition regulators in defence of consumers here in the United Kingdom once the investigations have taken place. There is no point cracking down on ticket touting just to have the model adopted by a billion-dollar industry. There are more transparent and equitable pricing models. A fairer and more competitive marketplace is desirable. I appeal to the Executive to work with and impress upon the Government the need to fashion an industry that values accessibility and diversity over that monopolistic control.

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

**Mr Brooks:** Thank you.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Thank you.

**Ms Nicholl:** I have to say that I am disappointed by the number of Members who have made Oasis puns during their speeches. I

include you in that, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think that we should all be above that. You will not hear any puns from me. Actually, you will not hear very much from me because my colleague Sian Mulholland, despite her numerous Oasis references, was far more articulate and knowledgeable on the subject than I could be.

I really appreciated David Brooks's speech just now. Many interesting points have been raised, and I do not have much to add. I too tried to get Oasis tickets and started to feel more stressed than you do when you are trying to get Christmas experience tickets. I gave up when the site crashed, and I am glad that I did. While the issue of dynamic and surge pricing — prices changing according to demand — and whether the Government should clamp down on that is not a new one, it has been highlighted significantly by the Oasis tickets debacle.

I welcome the way in which the motion has been framed. The focus is on the core issues, the first of which is the lack of transparency and communication with consumers to ensure that they are fully informed of their rights. It is right that the Consumer Council has a role to play. I await with interest the CMA investigation. Declan spoke really well about how, although most products that are subject to dynamic pricing allow free choice, in the case of tickets, there is no free choice. They are finite, and people do not have the luxury of time or of shopping around. People who have been waiting for hours are then given only minutes to decide whether they want to buy a ticket that is potentially hundreds of pounds more than was originally advertised. The point is that people should know when they are waiting in a queue that the ticket can go up only to a maximum price, that they are not wasting their time and that they know what they have potentially signed up to. It is common practice for companies to charge more for flights, trains and hotels at peak times or at short notice. That is allowed under UK consumer protection law, but what is not allowed is the misleading of customers.

David touched on how common the practice is in the US and said that it is becoming more common here. In 2022, tickets to Bruce Springsteen were selling for up to \$5,000. That is madness. That led to legislation being introduced on regulation. How the US's legislation progresses is something on which to keep an eye. It is not a new issue, however. I hope that this moment acts as a catalyst for change that delivers a fairer system for consumers.

**Ms McLaughlin:** At the start of my remarks, I will say two things. First, I am absolutely not a fan of Oasis. *[Laughter.]* Some people in the Chamber may be lifelong fans, because they sound as though they are, but I am not one. Secondly, to many outside the Chamber, it may seem a wee bit bizarre, and even a wee bit frustrating, that we are taking 90 minutes in the Chamber to debate Oasis tickets. It is not hard to imagine that anyone who has waited for years for a hip operation or a knee operation, or an operation for something much worse, or anyone who is locked in poverty without any opportunity to get out of it, will be wondering whether we might not have better things to discuss and debate. The fundamental, underlying issue is important, however. It is an issue about a monopoly. It is about trampling on the little guy. It is about big companies trapping working-class people into paying much more than they can afford. That is why we are discussing the matter today and why time has been set aside for a debate. It is about extortion, pure and simple. That is the reason that we are all here, setting aside the puns and all.

Like everyone else here, a few weeks ago, I heard at first hand stories of people forced to queue for hours just to get a shot at one of the prized tickets for the reunion tour. Some 14 million people from 158 countries formed part of that digital queue, including lifelong fans just hoping to revisit the music of their formative years. When they joined that queue, they made a choice on the basis of the information that they had at the time, only to find out hours later that the price of tickets had ballooned to something that was totally unaffordable for many and much more than double what was originally advertised. It is not hard to imagine why those fans felt robbed, hard done by and, in many cases, completely conned.

Consumers therefore need and deserve openness, transparency and a level playing field. In that context, I am really glad to debate the motion today, and we will be supporting it. I note that the CMA is already investigating that instance of so-called dynamic pricing. We have already heard from the consumer group Which?, whose advice is that people who were charged overinflated prices should be refunded. I know that many of us agree with that assessment. I am also reassured by the attention that the practice has received in the press and from the relevant agencies. The CMA has already stated that it will investigate concerns about the sale of concert tickets for Oasis. Every day is a school day, for I enjoyed the contributions from Sian and David about the

monopoly and what is happening behind dynamic pricing.

### 6.15 pm

Tempting as it may be to put this solely on the CMA, I do not think that that would be right. There must be a role for our Government here, whether through engagement with the UK Government or measures that can be taken much closer to home. It would be wrong to let the motion pass without clearly calling on the Economy Minister to confirm that, should recommendations be produced, he will undertake to do everything in his power to advance whatever changes in legislation or policy are required. After all, in 2021, the CMA produced recommendations on protection for consumers buying tickets on the secondary market, but I do not see very much evidence at all of their implementation by the UK Government. Recommendations are one thing, but delivery is quite another. The CMA can assist policymakers, but it cannot implement policy. That is our job and the job of the Department. In the South, we have already seen a ban on the practice of reselling tickets above face value, and, in Britain, the new Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport appears intent on taking action on the issue through that Department's work.

Of course, when discussing those types of practice, we should recognise the huge importance of live gigs and concerts to our cultural offering. Arts and culture are the fabric of our towns and communities across the North, and ensuring that everyone has access to watch or participate in arts and culture is vital for our well-being, the places where we live and our economy. It must, however, be affordable and accessible.

In conclusion, we support the motion and look forward to seeing the recommendations produced by the CMA as well as any actions that can be taken forward by Stormont and our Ministers to end this unfair and exploitative practice.

**Mr Carroll:** I declare an interest as someone who tries to purchase music tickets when I can. Unfortunately, like the artists in front of me, I am forced to use Ticketmaster. For years, Ticketmaster has acted as a parasitic middle man, fleecing artists and fans alike while contributing absolutely nothing to the music industry. Dynamic pricing experts expect music fans to pay, as we have heard, hundreds of pounds in ticket premiums. The executives line

their pockets with cuts of up to 30% from that ticket pricing.

The Ticketmaster boss, Michael Rapino, was named as the fifth highest-paid American CEO in 2022. He has profited off the backs of those who see almost none of the money. That foul system rips joy out of the arts and rips people off at the same time. Ticketmaster is not new to scalping customers. For years, it has been monopolising the live music market and hiking up prices with hidden fees and costs. It recruited professional scalpers to cheat the system in order to resell tickets at eye-watering prices. In that way, it can get a second cut when the tickets are resold.

The problem goes way beyond dynamic pricing. The growth of streaming services offers another way to rip off artists while making billions. Platforms such as Spotify keep costs low by paying artists pennies while they share an 85% cut of the profits with big-time labels. They pay \$0.000173 per stream to artists, which is a tiny and shocking figure. The music industry is riddled with bloated corporate middlemen whose only purpose is to leech off those with actual talent. It is not about supply and demand; it is about greed. Regular people are priced out of experiencing their favourite artists and going to their favourite gigs.

Big corporations set the prices, control the algorithms and pocket the difference. It is not just ticketing platforms that do it. Dynamic pricing does not just start and end here. We have heard of pubs discovering that they can charge more for drinks later at night and at weekends. Some shops have installed digital labels on essentials so that prices can be changed on a notion. What a disgraceful state of play at the minute.

Access to arts, goods and services should not be left to the whim of the market. People are being fleeced for trying to survive and for trying to enjoy themselves. That is why it is important to discuss this matter today. The Assembly needs to protect people from money-grabbing executives and advocate proper public regulation of dynamic pricing to limit the power of money-driven scam artists.

Class is at the heart of it all. Those who have wealth or wealthy families can afford to pay inflated ticket prices. Those who cannot have to do without, but they are the same people who have to grapple with all the other problems of working-class life: long waiting lists, the mental health crisis and so on and so forth. Class runs really, really deep in the arts. Róisín Lanigan stated in 'The Irish Times' at the weekend that

half of the nominees for the BRIT Awards, the Mercury Prize and the BAFTAs were privately educated, yet only 6% of the total population of Britain went to private school. Class is everywhere, and class runs deep. In our society, we need to have art for the masses, not just for the ruling classes.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** I call Philip McGuigan to wind. Philip, you have up to 10 minutes.

**Mr McGuigan:** It was an enjoyable debate on a very serious issue, leaving aside all the Members who tried to insert pretty cringey puns. It is, as I said, a serious matter. I scored out aspects of my contribution as they were covered by everybody else. Everybody who spoke got to the heart of the issue in recent weeks: fairness agus [Translation: and] transparency. Is it fair to ask people who hope to go to a concert to see their favourite singer or band to queue online for several hours with no idea what price they may end up being asked to pay for tickets, should they be lucky enough to reach the end of the queue before the tickets sell out? As we found out recently with the Oasis ticket sale, they may be asked to pay a price four times what they initially expected it to be. We all used our own examples in the debate. Two people, sitting beside each other in the same home but using different laptops, could be asked to pay a difference of £300 for the exact same ticket. Is that fair? Given the contributions of all the Members today, clearly, we, in this Chamber, recognise that it is not fair.

Everybody touched on the same points, with degrees of variation. Colm Gildernew made a very good point about the contribution of artists and bands to society and the fact that, whatever system is in place, we need to fairly protect them as well as fans. Paul Frew talked, as everybody did, about not being against dynamic pricing per se, but said that, in this instance, there are clearly issues that need to be addressed. As he said, people should feed into the CMA's investigation by Thursday. Sian Mulholland talked about the pricing out of everyday fans, which is a contribution that, by and large, everybody made. She suggested that we need to see a cap on prices and that there is a need for regulation of the secondary market, in particular. I wrote down that she and David Brooks were vying for the worst pun, but then everybody piled in on that.

Colin Crawford said that, as well as people feeling ripped off on tickets, as most big concerts require travel to Dublin — given that we do not have a Casement Park in the North — they face the added cost of transport and

hotels. He rightly pointed out that it is not only tickets that people feel ripped off on. Many concertgoers already face huge hikes on accommodation, and they feel ripped off on that. He quoted an example of people who, before a concert was announced, had booked hotels for a particular weekend being thrown out of those hotels once the concert was announced, and their hotel rooms then being rebooked at extortionate prices.

Matthew O'Toole outlined his experience of trying to get tickets. He rightly touched on the fact that it is ordinary working people who are being faced with extraordinary costs to see their favourite bands and their heroes. He pointed out, as did Sian and others, the impact that that will have on the grassroots music scene if it is not dealt with.

Declan McAleer outlined his case and explained the difference between the example of people going to concerts and other examples where dynamic pricing may be of benefit to consumers through lower prices as a result of supply and demand. He also outlined that some of our colleagues in the Dáil have highlighted the issue and that the Oasis example has left a bad feeling among everybody.

David Brooks went into a lot of detail on dynamic pricing and, essentially, price gouging. He said that we need to learn from some of the things that are happening in the US so that we do not see them happening here. He said that, because Ticketmaster has a monopoly, eventually only people with deep pockets will be able to buy tickets. Gerry Carroll laboured that point as well. We need to see action from the Government to address that.

Kate Nicholl welcomed the wording and tenet of the motion. Thank you very much for that. She pointed to what Declan said about the difference between dynamic pricing for concerts and other examples: it is not the same because when it comes to people who are looking to go to concerts, there is no free choice and no ability to shop around.

Sinéad McLaughlin, quite rightly, pointed out that there are other serious and important issues that people will expect the Assembly and MLAs to be talking about. Thank God that we can do two things at once, but this is also a very important issue. She talked about the resale of tickets, which is another thing that needs to be addressed. She felt that there was a role for the Executive there. She talked, rightly, about the importance of concerts, music, culture and arts in what we do here and said that everybody must have access to that.

Gerry Carroll spoke very passionately and was scathing of Ticketmaster and its profiteering from fans. He outlined his criticism of the music industry at the top corporate level and pointed out the impact that that is having on working people.

I can only speak from my own experience. Up until two months ago, I — I assume like most people — had not heard the phrase "dynamic pricing" in such terms and much less understood its impact on concertgoers. While I accept —

**Mr Brooks:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McGuigan:** Yes.

**Mr Brooks:** The point about language is an important one, because not only does Ticketmaster use the term "dynamic pricing" but it talks about "platinum tickets". The implication is that there is something extra or special about those tickets, but really they are the same tickets that others have bought at face value being raised in price because of demand. Some of the language being used to mislead consumers is important too.

**Mr McGuigan:** Absolutely. That is a very good point and adds to the point about fairness and transparency. Others have pointed out that dynamic pricing for concerts did not start with the Oasis example, but what happened there brought it to everybody's front and centre view. Most people were shocked by what they saw: all of you in here who tried to get tickets, everybody else who tried to get tickets and people who got to the point where they could buy tickets but found that the ticket price had been grossly inflated. People felt ripped off. When most people began that process, they were unaware of the situation, so there is an issue of transparency in that case. That is being investigated, and we await the outcome, but there is fundamentally an issue about whether dynamic pricing, even with consumer knowledge, is a fair practice for distributing tickets for concerts and events. Given the debate, it is clear that the view of the Assembly is that it is not fair and needs to be dealt with.

In closing, I reiterate what most people pointed out. There is an investigation by the Competition and Markets Authority into the Ticketmaster scenario, and I urge people to contribute to that.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes the extortionate prices charged for concert tickets as a direct result of dynamic pricing; recognises the lack of transparency around dynamic pricing and the fact that consumers may be unaware that the price of tickets can be increased by 100% of the original purchase price; further notes the role of the Consumer Council in protecting consumer rights and the need for concertgoers to be informed of their rights around dynamic pricing; and calls on the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), as part of its investigation into Ticketmaster, to provide recommendations on how ticket providers and music promoters could be prohibited from engaging in dynamic pricing.*

*Adjourned at 6.30 pm.*