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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 17 January 2017

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Kennedy] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Opposition Business

Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme: Public Inquiry

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Hanna: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the mounting public concern relating to the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scheme and the serious allegations of incompetence, corruption and abuse; further recognises the damage caused to public confidence in these devolved democratic institutions; calls for the establishment of a public inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005, to be chaired by a judicial figure proposed by the Lord Chief Justice; believes that the First Minister should stand aside pending publication of the final inquiry report; further believes that the terms of reference should include the development and operation of the scheme, any matter in relation to policy, financial, operation and compliance, the role and conduct of relevant persons and organisations, assess if there were breaches of any relevant code, public standards or employment contract, the response to and treatment of persons who raised concerns, if any person with a potential conflict of interest acted to their own benefit or the benefit of others, assess all RHI applications and report on any actions to be taken in respect of suspected fraud, the suspension and recovery of payments and the future operation of the scheme, make such recommendations as the inquiry believes necessary, including in relation to any issue of potential malfeasance in public office or of suspected criminal activity identified; believes that the inquiry should issue a final report within six months of its commencement,

with the provision for interim reports at least on a two monthly basis; further calls for all inquiry reports to be published in full upon completion without requiring the agreement of any Executive Minister, the Executive or the Secretary of State, with copies of any report lodged in the Assembly Library; calls for any case of suspected fraud identified to be referred to the PSNI; and further calls on the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy to bring forward a plan to arrest the liability to the public purse.

Members, yesterday, we gathered to discuss some of the proposals for cost recovery in the renewable heat incentive scheme, and, today, this motion attempts to put in place, finally, a public inquiry to establish who has been responsible for this governance disaster, what lessons can be learned and implemented, and to do so in public, free from political interference or cover-up or the perception of cover-up. If these institutions are falling over this issue, at least in part, and people, we are being told, are to have their say, it is our duty to give them the information to have their say as much as possible. Not the spin, just the facts. Who decided to amend the scheme from Britain? Why were warnings ignored? If warnings were made, what were they? What opportunities were and were not taken to fix the problem? Who benefited from it?

I hear Sinn Féin in the media branding this a meaningless discussion today. That party abstained on the topic of a public inquiry earlier this month in Belfast City Hall, and it looks as if it will here as well. Sinn Féin can brand accountability meaningless, but many will interpret it as another way of avoiding the question: what did you know, when did you know it and what did you do about it? Presumably, their voting to water down an investigation into the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) a few months ago was meaningless as well and not just the character of their opposition to accountability that, to them, is just about sound bites and distraction.

Accountability is, of course, a very important principle in public life; it is the norm in politics around the world — everywhere except here. It seems that a Minister will take responsibility for a disaster in his or her Department. As a minimum, this motion required the First Minister to stand aside for the duration for an inquiry, although I accept that that is now a moot point as we are all being stood aside next week for our sins.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hanna: I am happy to.

Mr Agnew: Is it not a shame that we have the same outcome, with Arlene Foster no longer the First Minister, but we do not have a public inquiry? What we do now have is unstable institutions. Surely she should have done the right thing and stepped aside.

Ms Hanna: I could not agree more. A lot of this could have been avoided by showing humility and by living up to the principle of accountability in public life.

I think that the motion is a fairly comprehensive overview of what we are proposing, but I want to speak to a few specific aspects and address some of the criticisms and concerns that people have stated. Another red herring has been raised, particularly by the party that usually sits to my right but which is absent today. Part of their 12 days of Christmas positions on a public inquiry in the last few weeks was that they said that they did not want a public inquiry, and they brought up criticism by the SDLP, by other parties and by human rights groups, of the 2005 Inquiries Act. That criticism is based on the issue of using national security as a blocker to get to truth, which is a convenient mutual veto that the party beside me benefits from as well. If Sinn Féin could explain what aspect of the renewable heat incentive scheme they think will be used to invoke a national security clause in this inquiry, their protestations would have some weight.

Other deflection tactics were used that this could cost millions and take years, as previous inquiries certainly have, but they do not have to take for ever, and many do not. Some of the first inquiries conducted under similar legislation in the Republic were quick, effective and good value for money. I am thinking in particular of the first Haughey inquiry and of the 1999 deposit interest retention tax (DIRT) inquiry into allegations of tax evasion in the banking sector. That concluded after 26 days, on budget and led to prosecutions; it was a triumph for

transparency and public accountability. Yes, some of the corruption scandals have dragged on over the years, primarily due to challenges based on the time that had elapsed, the challenges of compelling private individuals and of getting access to private information. That is also a red herring, as this is a relatively fresh scandal, and almost all those involved, be they elected Members or special advisers or civil servants, are still in post or, at the very least, are still in the neighbourhood and can be invited to come along. All the relevant papers will be — or should be — a matter of record in the Department, so we should not see the same legal battles to compel papers.

Our proposals also suggest that the judge to lead the inquiry be appointed by the Lord Chief Justice. We reject entirely the suggestion that it would be appointed by the Attorney General, who is himself a political appointee of this Executive. It is fair to say that that would not have the arm's-length remove that an inquiry would need. The format for the inquiry, as outlined, will facilitate cost recovery from those claims that are found to be fraudulent and can provide the basis for prosecution if malfeasance in public office is demonstrated or if other wilful fraudulent exploitation of the scheme is found. The inquiry should take no more than six months, which we think is entirely plausible, with updates at two monthly intervals. It should not require approval from any Ministers — hopefully, Ministers in the Assembly, or, potentially, direct rule Ministers. One way or the other, the outcome of this inquiry will not be able to be kicked into the long grass, and the outcomes cannot be suppressed.

Mr Ford: I appreciate the Member giving way. What she has actually said in all the points that she has highlighted so far is that the terms of reference under which an inquiry is set up could entirely deal with all the bogus objections that have been raised to it. Also, very specifically, in an inquiry under the Inquiries Act, it would not be for Ministers to withhold information; the information would be released by the judge who chairs the inquiry.

Ms Hanna: The Member is entirely correct, and that is what is regrettable. We are now on 17 January, and these proposals have been in existence. We have been discussing these particular proposals for going on a month now, and the mechanisms that we need are in legislation. It was always a fallacy that we would create new legislation. The fact that this House is not going to be here after next week makes very clear that we would not have been able to create new legislation. You are

absolutely right that we are ready to proceed on this.

Ms Mallon: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hanna: Yes.

Ms Mallon: Does the Member also agree that, considering we could have been several weeks into a public inquiry to establish the truth, with every day that has gone by, £85,000 of the public's money has been squandered? Does she think that that is an absolute shame?

Ms Hanna: I do. I agree that the loss of public money is a great shame, and also the fact that people are being pushed into an election to have their say on accountability and corruption without actually being given all of the facts. In this society, we have become used to not getting answers, unfortunately, whether that refers to legacy issues of the past or glossing over the alphabet soup of scandals of this Executive around NAMA, SIF, the renewable heat incentive and many others. We need to change that culture, we need to start getting answers and we need people to understand that this Assembly is more than a racket and a farce.

We regret that an election has been forced before we have had the answers on the issue, but, unless parties choose to stand in the way of this motion, it should lead to an inquiry about who knew what and when and what they did about it. Those who do not fear being asked those questions should have no problem in supporting this motion, supporting the inquiry and restoring some accountability.

Mrs Little Pengelly: I rise to speak on the motion and outline my full support for an independent judge-led inquiry. Inquiries can take many forms — statutory, judicial or under the Inquiries Act. However, the forum must include full independence, public confidence and sufficient robustness to get to the truth. This must happen as soon as possible.

There have been many allegations and much politicking on this issue across all parties. First, I want to put it clearly on the record that I welcome the acknowledgement of regret by Arlene Foster, by senior officials in their evidence to the Committee and just yesterday, by the Economy Minister. Make no mistake, I clearly understand — we all clearly understand — the significant concern of the public on this issue. As Chairperson of the Finance Committee, my role is in high-quality and prudent guardianship of public funds. That did

not happen in this case; mistakes were made. Good policy development and design is critical to ensuring government policies deliver on their intended outcomes. Likewise, we need effective scrutiny to ensure that, if and when mistakes are made in the design, these are picked up and addressed. We all need to step back on this issue and look at it objectively. Yes, there was a failure in policy design but also a failure of scrutiny. The safeguards that we put in place did not deliver. The original scheme got Executive approval, Committee scrutiny and agreement and Assembly scrutiny and agreement, and all of that failed to pick up this flaw in the initial design stage. We need to know why.

10.45 am

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Little Pengelly: I am sorry; I have only five minutes, unfortunately. If we are to move — *[Interruption.]* Everybody will get an opportunity.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order.

Mrs Little Pengelly: If we are to move to a truly normalised political landscape here, and I believe that is very much what the people of Northern Ireland want, it will require political maturity. The era of throwing tantrums and the toys out of the pram must be left in the past. Mistakes will happen. Our processes are made up of people, and people are fallible, but we need to work collectively — that is our responsibility — not only to prevent mistakes but to find solutions when mistakes happen. We needed calm heads and clear thoughts. The Assembly became fixated on the stepping-aside issue, and we, in my view, should have focused on two things. First, how did this happen? Secondly, how can it be fixed? That is our duty, and it is a duty on all of us.

There have been very many nasty allegations thrown around the Chamber over the last number of weeks and months. Let me say this very clearly: I am not corrupt, and I am not arrogant. I honestly believe that my colleagues and the colleagues who serve in the Chamber are not arrogant or corrupt either. I got involved in politics to serve the people, to do my utmost to use all and any ability I have to do what is right, to be an advocate and to deliver for the people of South Belfast and Northern Ireland. I am saddened that the hunt of one person and stepping aside have been used in a way that is now threatening the very institutions. I do not think that is justified, and, in fact, it will serve only to delay the very necessary inquiry even

further. I remain, as I know my colleagues in the DUP remain, fully committed to building a better and shared future for all in Northern Ireland.

Mr Swann: I speak as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee. It is not usual for the Chair to speak about an inquiry before the Committee has concluded its evidence and reported on its findings and recommendations. In respect of this precedent, I will not comment in any great detail on the Committee's deliberations beyond what has been discussed in evidence sessions and is a matter of public record. However, I felt the need to speak today to highlight the substantial amount of work undertaken already by the Public Accounts Committee in conducting its inquiry to demand answers on what went so badly wrong in the RHI scheme, how it happened and how it should be fixed.

Although I have been Chair of the Public Accounts Committee for only a short time, I am proud to have held the office for eight months and am proud of the Committee's work in that time. I am grateful not only for the support of the members of the Committee in bringing the RHI issue to the fore in what has been a very challenging time but for making my job as Chairperson easier. Sometimes the experience I have had of being a father of two small children has also helped in the Committee.

I also thank the Committee Clerk and staff for their support, but I pay special tribute to the Comptroller and Auditor General and his team who initially brought the issue to the fore. As Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, I commend the enormous amount of work the Committee has carried out over the last six months in its inquiry into the renewable heat incentive scheme. Over six evidence sessions, some very serious issues on the design, administration and governance of the scheme have arisen.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: Certainly.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member agree with me that it is very strange that the Ministers responsible did not bring this issue forward to the Assembly but that it was left to the Auditor General to uncover it?

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

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for causing me to have an extra minute, but, as I said, I will not be commenting outside that at this stage.

The Committee was briefed by the Comptroller and Auditor General on 22 June on the scale of the problem, which resulted in him qualifying his audited opinion for the 2015-16 financial accounts for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on RHI. That was because a substantial part of the expenditure was not approved by DFP, and he was not satisfied that the systems being operated by DETI were adequate to prevent or detect the abuse of the scheme. Members were shocked by the magnitude of the cost of the scheme, which could cost the public purse £1.18 billion over 20 years.

Key issues that the C&AG reported included that the scheme had exceeded the maximum amount that Her Majesty's Treasury was prepared to fund, that the excess funding would now have to be met from the Northern Ireland block grant and that that significant cost would continue until 2036.

The Committee heard from the Department about how it failed to obtain the required approval from DFP for the £11.9 million of expenditure during a seven-month period between 2015 and 2016. In addition to that, the design of the scheme crucially did not introduce tiering of payments as operated in Great Britain, where a reduced rate was applied after the equipment had been operating for 15% of the hours in a year. The Comptroller and Auditor General's report made it clear that tiering, had it been introduced, would have helped to prevent the potential abuse of the scheme and what has become known as the cash for ash scandal, and we possibly would not be here today.

The Committee heard how there had been allegations of abuse by an anonymous whistleblower, which, while still under investigation, appeared to point to the lack of controls in the scheme that could have prevented the alleged abuses. The Committee also learned how the administration of the scheme was largely left to Ofgem and that the rate of inspection was very low; actually 0.86% of applications — less than 1% of all applications. Recent inspections by Ofgem of areas of high risk appear to confirm that there are indeed serious compliance issues.

The Committee shared its concerns about the design of the non-domestic RHI scheme and the manner in which the Department had operated and monitored it, which had made it completely vulnerable to abuse. The high level

of applications received around the time of the spike and concerns raised by the whistle-blower compounded these concerns and still remain unanswered. It was therefore not surprising that the Committee prioritised RHI to the degree that it has. All other priorities have been pushed to one side to get to the bottom of what has gone so badly wrong with the scheme. Members have worked tirelessly to get answers from all the main players in this sorry saga, from the former DETI accounting officer, who has been before the Committee three times; Ofgem; Cambridge Economic Policy Associates, who were the consultants on the scheme; and another former DETI accounting officer/accounting officer for the Department of Finance.

The key issues raised by the Comptroller and Auditor General have been explored in great detail by the PAC, including the role of Ofgem on the quality and lack of inspections, the poor design of the scheme and the many errors associated with it, which are well-documented in Hansard as part of the proceedings of the Public Accounts Committee's inquiry. The Committee has pursued the inquiry as a top priority and continues to put pressure on the Department to provide answers as a matter of urgency in the interests of transparency, good governance and accountability.

While, in some quarters, the media seem to be taking all the credit for bringing the issue to the fore, it has been the sheer diligence, dogged determination and commitment of the Public Accounts Committee that have spearheaded action to address the main failings of the scheme. During its inquiry, the Public Accounts Committee has put pressure on the Department to take action urgently and address the problem of cost controls. It has pushed for 100% inspection, demanded —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The Member must draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Swann: — transparency regarding the list of applicants and seeks answers to the alleged abuses of the scheme.

Dr Farry: I rise obviously to speak in favour of the motion and, just picking up from the last speaker, to recognise the ongoing role of the Public Accounts Committee in working on behalf of the House to provide accountability on this matter.

For some people, this seems to be evolving into a blame game between the DUP and Sinn Féin before an election on who walked out of the

Executive first, how much RHI was responsible for it or whether it was the default on various equality agendas. The bottom line here is that this will be about whether people can have good government in Northern Ireland. Around the world, people expect and, indeed, deserve to have good government. What this means is that there are strong policy outcomes, people are working to deliver on society's needs and there is proper accountability and transparency in government.

Instead, we have a litany of failures by the current Executive on the use of resources, accountability and transparency. There are numerous examples of that. Obviously, with RHI, the costs are enormous. At the same time, we have issues around things like the cost of division, where there is an ongoing cost to the public purse of many hundreds of millions of pounds every year and, if we are using the word "corrupt", the social investment fund, which is a corruption in public policymaking and the use of resources.

RHI has struck a chord with people because they understand the waste of resources. It really relates to their daily lives and struggles and how people are seen to be taking advantage of what has been an overly generous scheme. They can understand what can be described, at best, as being clear incompetence in government. Of course, there may be, and there are suspicions that it is, more than that.

Obviously, there are two parallel discussions that we have to have: one is about mitigation and the other is about accountability. Both need to be addressed. Anyone who says, "Let's park the accountability, we are focusing on mitigation" or people who say, "Let's do the accountability and not address the mitigation" are not doing their job. The two are parallel tracks that go hand in hand.

There are three main questions about accountability that we have to address: the first is the design of the scheme; the second is the way in which whistle-blowers were handled; and the third is the speed — or the lack of speed, I should stress — with which remedial action was taken over the past 12 to 18 months — indeed, even going back further — to ensure that an overly generous scheme is shut down.

There are suspicions that the attitude from government was that, given that this was being paid for by AME money — or so people thought — we did not really have to bother with all of this. But it is taxpayers' money as well, just as much as the block grant is taxpayers' money.

In that regard, I am disappointed with the passive approach that has been taken by the UK Treasury and the Secretary of State in their seeing this as purely a matter for the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is a matter for every single taxpayer in the United Kingdom.

It is important to stress that the request for Arlene Foster to step aside was only one part of this, but it is not an unreasonable request. In any other walk of life, someone who comes under a sustained range of allegations — I stress the word "allegations" — would be expected to go off on what we often call "gardening leave".

Clearly, we are moving more towards a consensus on a public inquiry. The DUP has now come to that late, and anyone who suggests that the DUP has always been in favour of a public inquiry has not been following what has been said. Indeed, we are getting into a slightly Orwellian post-truth politics, where people are making this up as they go along, but the record clearly shows where they have been on this. Even in the past few days, we have seen the DUP leader stressing that a public inquiry will be announced imminently. The clock is ticking, and we have still not heard anything in that regard. I am not entirely sure, though, how a Back-Bench Member of the Assembly dictates to Ministers.

There are a few other concerns that we need to recognise. One of them is the potential politicisation of the Civil Service. I say that with a degree of reservation, but I am slightly concerned whenever we see civil servants' names being quoted as part of political debates and documents being selectively briefed to the media, including references to civil servants, to back up political points. It is something that may come back to haunt us, and it is important across these islands that we preserve the impartiality of the Civil Service irrespective of who is in charge.

Also, the nature of how government is operated is not something that I or my colleague David Ford would recognise as how we did things, with special advisers playing games behind the scenes —

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

Dr Farry: — and, indeed, special advisers being named. Everything a special adviser does is in the name of a Minister. It is important that that is fully understood and that we have proper collaboration, as we practised in

government, between a Minister's advisers and civil servants.

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

Mr Dunne: I rise to speak on this item of business that has been brought before the House as an MLA and also a member of the PAC. The Public Accounts Committee has had a rigorous programme of work, and we have gone through a number of months of concentrating on that work and have engaged with a number of those involved in the scheme. All members — I stress all members — of the various parties fully participated in discussion at PAC.

Before the renewable heat incentive scheme was introduced, there were many calls to move away from an over-reliance on imported fossil fuels. There is no doubt that mistakes and errors have been made within the RHI scheme, and that has been acknowledged by Arlene Foster our former First Minister time and time again — she reiterated that in the House on 19 December 2016 — and by our Economy Minister, Simon Hamilton, on a number of occasions. Indeed, Arlene Foster has indicated that she is happy to attend the Public Accounts Committee. She is fully supportive of any inquiry or investigation and happy to appear before it.

Our focus has rightly been on resolving the RHI issue and getting to the bottom of what really happened.

Yesterday, the Minister for the Economy brought his mitigation plans to the Economy Committee and the House. I believe that those plans will be a crucial first step in reducing the burden on our Budget and improving the level of control in the RHI scheme. The lack of control measures and the flaws in its design have been acknowledged, and, indeed, I know, as a member of the Public Accounts Committee, that at a recent meeting we heard from the permanent secretary, who stated:

"The intention was good, but the execution and design were seriously wrong."

As has already been mentioned, the consultants whom DETI engaged to design the scheme admitted at the Committee that depression, which would have controlled payments on demand, was missed. They freely admitted that at the Committee.

11.00 am

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dunne: No, thanks. There were clear risks from the start in having two bodies involved in managing the scheme. DETI was responsible for the policy framework, and Ofgem was responsible for managing the applications and installations, including compliance. Ofgem, which was working on the ground, did not even have a representative based in Northern Ireland. The other major discrepancy was that there was no pre-approval for applications to the scheme. Audits on the ground were very poor. Only a small sample was carried out, and they were not risk-based. There was poor communication and follow-up on the issues raised during the audits. The scheme presented a clear risk by way of ownership and responsibility. Departmental officials admitted poor management of the scheme, and there was no proper management in place. Project management, which would have involved a process of authorisation, qualification and review were all not adequately in place.

Mrs Palmer: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dunne: No, thanks. There was no evidence of a management review by DETI. There was no clear establishment of a risk register that would have identified the major financial risk of overspend in the project. The business case, which was referred to the Department of Finance on 9 March 2012, stated that Ofgem would provide regular management reports that would enable the uptake to be carefully monitored and forecast expenditure to DETI. Again, there is no evidence of that ever taking place in the Department.

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

Mr Dunne: It is important that we get to the bottom of the problem and that corrective actions are put in place to stop a recurrence. The lessons learned from the project should be applied to all Departments.

Mr Lyons: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate and to speak to the motion. All Members are aware of the serious public interest, concern and, indeed, anger that have come to the fore over the issue. People are deeply troubled by what is going on, and they want to see action taken.

There are two things that, I believe, the public want to see, and they are addressed in the

motion. The first and most pressing is that people want to make sure that the costs that we could incur in Northern Ireland are brought under control. That is, first and foremost, the most important thing that the public want. They have been angered by this — not by the fact that there is a scheme in place but, most of all, by the fraud or allegations of fraud, abuse and waste. That is very troubling for many people. It is important that those costs are brought under control. The motion calls on the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy to bring forward a plan to arrest the liability to the public purse. We, obviously, had that debate yesterday.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: Yes, I will give way to the Member.

Mr Beggs: The Member has indicated his concern about potential fraud in the scheme, and that has been his focus. Does he share my concern that the Auditor General has highlighted that, legally, individuals who burned the wood pellets for 24 hours a day could make a return of 82% or 83% per annum, which is a ridiculous amount of profit? Does he share my concern that the scheme was set up with the potential to make that sort of profit?

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

Mr Lyons: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. That is exactly the point that I was making: there is public concern out there over the fact that people were getting so much money not because they were generating heat for legitimate purposes but because they were burning in order to make money. That is the whole point; that is where the public anger is coming from. It is important that we see —

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: I will not give way at this moment. That is why it is important that we have the cost controls in place. We will get that done first.

The other issue that we need to address is how this happened in the first place and how we got to this point. How could it have been prevented? What measures could have been put in place sooner? Who knew what, when and why? We have no problem bringing all of that to the fore and making sure that that information is in the public domain so that the people can see the process for themselves and we can learn lessons from it. That is very important. If those two steps are taken, it will

go a long way towards restoring some of the public confidence that has been damaged.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: Very briefly, yes.

Mr Stalford: Does the Member appreciate that there is a bit of irony in the fact that the only party now saying that they do not want an inquiry under the Inquiries Act is the party that supposedly left the Government over this issue?

Mr Lyons: Absolutely. The Member must have very good eyesight; maybe he was reading my notes. That is exactly the point that I was coming to.

If these are the issues that the people want to see addressed — cost controls and investigation or inquiry into these matters — then we have been very forthright in saying that we want to see them happen. Indeed, at the Executive meeting on 14 December, it was agreed with Sinn Féin that all the facts would be brought to the fore and that cost-cutting controls would be agreed, but they have walked away from all of that. I think that everybody in the Chamber now knows that Sinn Féin has not taken the action that it has taken over the last number of weeks because of some concerns over a public inquiry or over cost control measures relating to RHI; they have taken the action that they have taken because they want to bring down Stormont, because they are getting so much grief and such a hard time from their heartlands — perhaps, I should call them their "former heartlands". The grief that is coming to them is the reason why they have taken the action. Let us be honest — everybody in here knows this, and everybody watching must know this — if they really were concerned about the issues, they would have been here yesterday and would have been here today to look at these matters. That is the truth of the matter.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: Of course I will give way to Mr Dickson. Quickly, so that I can get Robin in.

Mr Dickson: I will be quick; thank you very much. It appears from Mr Lyons's comments that all of the blame lies with Sinn Féin. Does he accept that there is any blame to be apportioned to his party and the actions of his ministerial colleagues and friends, who have failed to answer the questions that the public want answered, have refused to stand aside

and have refused to give any answers? I am not an apologist for Sinn Féin, but is it any wonder that they and the rest of us are totally sceptical of what you are —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am not blaming Sinn Féin; I am saying that they are the ones walking away. This is not about RHI any more; they have walked away for other reasons. That is the point that I make. I want to have the public inquiry so that the people can see for themselves, but, of course, —

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

Mr Lyons: It is difficult for us to support the motion when it calls for the First Minister to step aside. That is not what should have happened.

Mr Stalford: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker [*Interruption.*] and thank you, pantomime crowd, for that introduction. This is an extremely serious issue, the seriousness of which should not be underestimated or wished away.

It is our responsibility as elected representatives to ensure the best outcomes for the people who send us here.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Yes.

Dr Farry: The Member just said that is something that people must not underestimate. Does he accept that his party has underestimated the public anger about it over the past month? The frustration today is that the parties here are calling for and endorsing a public inquiry. If his party had acted much sooner, at the beginning of December, acknowledged and recognised the problems and, at that stage, put a public inquiry in place, we would not be in this mess.

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

Mr Stalford: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I take your point. I do not underestimate the seriousness of the situation at all. I do not underestimate the anger that is out there about the issue at all, because I speak to my constituents, and I know that people are very angry and want answers.

There have been various reactions to the situation as it has developed, as my friend Gordon Lyons from East Antrim referenced. The other partner in Government, Sinn Féin, asked for an inquiry, and we acceded to that because we wanted the truth to be established. I still want the truth to be established, and I still want there to be a full, open public inquiry into all these matters, because it does no good to any of us for the reputation of politics to be maligned. Sinn Féin offered us terms for an inquiry — those were agreed. It asked for a public inquiry — that was agreed. The sole sticking point, from Sinn Féin's perspective, is that it demanded on a plate the head of the First Minister. From our perspective, that was unacceptable not only because the people of Northern Ireland, not seven months ago, elected her to the office but because, in the run-in to the debate on 19 December, it had become very apparent that those making the call for the First Minister to step aside were not doing so from a position of impartiality or from of a position of saying, "Oh, it is just like in the Civil Service when you are sent on gardening leave"; it is quite clear that those demanding that the First Minister step aside were doing so because —

Mr Allen: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Briefly, Andy, but let me finish my point.

They were doing so largely because they were motivated by a desire to score a political point and claim a political scalp. I am happy to give way to Mr Allen.

Mr Allen: Does the Member share the concerns of his party colleague Mr Dunne, who raised DETI and Ofgem's dual responsibility for the RHI policy? Does he share my concerns that, if the policy had been right in the first place, it is likely that we would not be in this scenario?

Mr Stalford: I absolutely agree that the management and oversight of the scheme were fundamentally flawed. It is important that, in a public inquiry, we establish the facts around that.

I agree with what Dr Farry said about the need for a two-pillar approach going forward. One is mitigation: it is essential that the money that has been staked on the scheme be clawed back as much as possible. It is absolutely essential for that to happen, because it is

committed expenditure that could be spent on other more valuable, more useful things.

It ill behoves a party that cannot even bring itself to be in the Chamber — it defends its abstentionist policy at Westminster and now abstains from Stormont as well — and which, through its behaviour over welfare reform, cost the people of Northern Ireland £174 million in real money over a period of two years — not committed expenditure, but real money — to lecture any of the others.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: I have only a minute and a half left.

One of the issues raised by others about the package that has been outlined by the Minister relates to the breaking of contracts. This has been portrayed as a contract being broken.

That is, potentially, a simplistic assessment. What we are dealing with here is the granting of aid under a statutory scheme, which is not the same thing as a contract. I am hopeful that those issues can be overcome.

11.15 am

As for accountability, it is absolutely vital that all the information — every email, every letter, every exchange — is brought into the public domain for everyone to see and to make a balanced assessment about who was responsible for what and how we got to this juncture. Thus far, that has not been the case, and we have had a drip feed of information from various sources. That is not conducive to the public good, nor is it conducive to informing people of what is and was actually going on.

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

Mr Stalford: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. From my perspective, I want all this to be brought into the public domain and sorted, because it is in none of our interests —

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

Mr Stalford: — that the reputation of politics should be blackened.

Ms S Bradley: Speaking on behalf of the SDLP, I want to make it clear that the motion represents the clarity of thinking that has been

missing from the DUP/Sinn Féin Executive to date. Nobody doubts that major mistakes have happened, and there are even suggestions of fraudulent activity, which were discussed at yesterday's meeting of the Economy Committee. Access to information has been deliberately denied to people in the House and to the general public; in fact, I submitted a question to the Minister some weeks ago asking for a breakdown of RHI recipients by district electoral area. I did so because I recognised that there were many legitimate applicants to the scheme who are in receipt of money in a very legitimate way. We need to be sensitive to those people, and we are not hanging anybody out to dry. Likewise, we were not after a head on a plate.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for giving way. *[Interruption.]* Obviously, the DUP is scared of what I was going to say. With regard specifically to legitimate applicants and legitimate users, what has not been mentioned, especially on this side of the House, is one of the major concerns that have been brought forward: the 886 applications that were made in a six-week period in October and November. That is an average of 147 installations a week. What was different about this scheme was that the burners had to be in place before an application could be made.

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

Ms S Bradley: Thank you. I fully agree and accept that point.

Information has been deliberately withheld from us and others in the House. I have to find things out via the media. It is certainly not the case that the Opposition have not been asking the questions; we have done so at every opportunity.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Bradley: I will not give way because my time is limited.

We have been asking the questions, and the answers have not been forthcoming. Why is that? What was there to hide?

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Bradley: No. I have no intention of giving way for the remainder of my speech.

There is little point in me speaking today on the dysfunction of the outgoing DUP/Sinn Féin

Executive. Clearly, that is now a matter of public record, and the public are very wise to that. It is a legacy of their own making. My only regret is the damage that it has done to the institutions in Northern Ireland whilst they were having their choreographed love-in.

Conveniently, then, when the time suited them, others left the Chamber, calling for an election and beating their chests before they ever thought it important to stop the haemorrhaging of public finances or to lay bare to the public the facts about the scheme. Why have they done that? That is a serious question, and there is nobody here today to answer it.

I regret that that is the space that we have all landed ourselves in. Basically, anybody at the outset of this Government may well have asked this question: how long can this Government survive without a moderate voice or without some clear thinking from the moderate parties? Now we have our answer.

Today, however, the SDLP continue to step up where others have failed. We present to you a motion that is in the public interest. It talks to what should happen: proper governance. This is how it looks. This is what should have happened when others had the gift. While it is laudable that you say, "Yes, we wanted an inquiry; yes, we are up for an inquiry", you had the gift of creating such an inquiry, and you did not do it. You had your partners in government, and the relationship was so cosy. I could quote many things that would be cringeworthy at this stage. What is the point? Let us look at the public interest here.

Mrs Palmer: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Bradley: I am sorry; I will finish on this because I am conscious of time.

The motion speaks to the public interest. It is not about politicking or playing one off against the other; it is about taking a responsible action that has been missing. I call on every politician in Northern Ireland who has a right to do so to put the public interest before their party interests and present themselves in the Lobby in support of the motion if they are genuine in their calls to see this fiasco brought to a swift end and the money directed to our hospitals, education and other places where it is so badly needed.

Words are hollow when an opportunity is presented to you and you do not take it. If you suggest you want to re-present yourself to be a Member of this House, you must search your soul now and ask, "What am I doing? What am I doing before I walk out those doors to make

sure the public interest is being served?". There are many doing absolutely nothing, only electioneering, spinning and trying to create something of an illusion that they are fit for government, but the political Febreze — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order.

Ms S Bradley: — that has been spread throughout the Building has somehow blurred people's vision of what has actually happened.

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

Ms S Bradley: I will indeed. I repeat my call and ask all responsible politicians to make their way through the Lobbies and put their vote where their comments have been to date.

Mr Frew: I rise to talk about this issue, as we have done on many occasions over the last number of months. I have watched this with quite a lot of interest. Something I am passionate about is energy policy — throughout the world, not just here in Northern Ireland — so I have watched with intrigue and interest. I have also been distraught at the white noise, sensationalism and bloodletting that have been created because all of that has ensured that we will not get this resolved in a timely fashion.

What has been going on since it was discovered that there was an issue with RHI? There have been independent inspections. Up to now, there have been about 300, I think. The Ministers have had a detailed assessment of legal advice on what they can do to fix it. We have also had an ongoing Public Accounts Committee investigation, which the Chair has eloquently spoken about — not about the investigation but about his understanding of the issue. We had the Audit Office report before that, so it is unfair and untrue to suggest that politicians or Ministers were not doing something about the issue. If some Members realised it only in late autumn, that says more about them than anyone else. It is vital that we put in place measures to manage the unintended pressure that the scheme is creating and will continue to create, if it is not fixed.

Many who legitimately entered the scheme in good faith may well now be caught up in a media storm. Businesses that rely on their good name, good faith, reputation and credibility could now be caught up in a sensationalist media storm over the head of this and all the hyperbole that has been created.

Let us try to get something done in a timely fashion. That is what the Minister brought forward yesterday.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for giving way. I take his point entirely. I am sure that he will not dispute that people who are conducting their business legitimately have absolutely nothing to fear from a public inquiry.

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

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his contribution, but it is not —

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. The Member is right that people have nothing to fear from a legitimate public inquiry, but legitimate businesses conducting themselves in a legitimate way have plenty to fear when their name is being dragged across the airwaves.

Mr Frew: That is the point that I was going to make; thank you for making it. It is not the public inquiry that anyone fears. It is the sensationalism of some sections of our media on this issue that can be very damaging. We have already had one good business, which happens to sell a trademark car, dragged through the mud unfairly. That will continue in a drip-feed fashion.

There has to be responsibility in the House for mistakes that are made, but look at what has happened —

Mrs Palmer: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: No, I am going to run out of time. I am really sorry. I would have if I had more time.

Look at what has happened over the last couple of months. There has been a drip feed of sensationalism by our media, and some of our politicians in this very House have been caught up in a blood fest and a feeding frenzy, wanting someone's head on a platter. We are here —

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: No, I cannot; I am sorry.

We are here to serve our people and, when mistakes happen, to fix them. Members called on Arlene Foster to come to the Chamber to explain. She came to the Chamber to explain, and you walked out. You walked out, and you

hurt the credibility of this place even further. You called for Arlene to go to the PAC. Unprecedentedly, Arlene Foster agreed, but the goalposts were moved yet again. Sinn Féin was receiving pressure from its nationalist competitors. It got itself on a hook and could not get itself off the hook. Sinn Féin is very mindful. It comes in here very confident, but it is going through something of a crisis. There is a bit of a meltdown, and it goes right into the very heartlands. It is scared because, for the first time, it has a socialist left flank, and it does not know how to deal with it. It is looking at a new SDLP leader, and it does not really know how to deal with it. Let us face it and say it as it is.

Sinn Féin's actions have created the inability of the House to finish a Public Accounts Committee inquiry. It cannot be finished, because of the Sinn Féin resignation. Let me just say at the end that we must put this in context. This is a projected spend of £480 million over 20 years; a projected spend that could be fixed. What about all the politicking on welfare reform last year that cost our people £173 million? It was the SDLP and Sinn Féin that created that. What about the very fact that, when you resign —

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

Mr Frew: — you cannot have a Budget? In July, that will cost this country £600 million in one year — £600 million in one year.

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

Mr Bell: The gravity of the situation that Northern Ireland faces today cannot be overestimated. Terminally ill children are being sent home from hospital or offered a hospital far away from their homes. We have a ward in the Ulster Hospital where nurses were ill and there was no money to pay for bank nurses, with the outcome that the ward was closed. At the same time, as we know, serious and grave offence has been caused by the renewable heat incentive scheme. We are called to the House to be servants of the people. The people are not our servants. The truth of what has happened in this scheme is the priority above all.

11.30 am

As I said yesterday, I spoke out after 20 years in elected office only when journalists were able to prove to me that requests were made for me

to speak but misinformation was being given out that I was unavailable and there was an instruction to make sure I was not called before the Public Accounts Committee. People and the media have asked when I will say again what I said in the House yesterday. Let me make it clear when I will say again what I said in the House yesterday: I will say it to the judged public inquiry. I will say it exactly as I said it to the House because it is honest and truthful, and I will say it to the judge under oath.

There were serious concerns with this scheme, and there is evidence available that shows that special advisers interfered to stop the scheme. The reduction in the tariff, when we moved to do that, could have solved so many of the problems under my watch. I came into office and had this scheme closed within 10 months as Minister, but during that time, there was an opportunity to reduce the tariff. We have seen what happened when the tariff was reduced. The massive cost to the public was not there, but there was interference from special advisers, as has been confirmed to me by our Civil Service, and there is evidence — I kept records of it — to show that. That is a serious concern and has to be for everyone in Northern Ireland.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Bell: Yes.

Mr Swann: Is the Member alluding to the special advisers being involved in driving up the spike that happened in October and November?

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

Mr Bell: Thank you very much.

What I am saying is that, when the opportunity came before me to reduce the tariff, which was the advice I was being given then, special advisers interfered to delay the reduction in the tariff. That is confirmed to me by the top people in the Civil Service and confirmed to me by the evidence I have. I have told the truth. I have been suspended from a party I have given decades of service to while much more serious things have occurred.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he recognise, as a former Minister, that special advisers have no authority within the government system? They act solely on the direction of their Ministers, and, if they are acting independently without that authority, the

Minister is still nevertheless accountable for those actions.

Mr Bell: I take full accountability for my actions, but I did not appoint my special adviser. My special adviser was appointed by the party, and, when other special advisers interfered to stop the reduction in the tariff, the advice given to me by the Civil Service and by my permanent secretary — it is on record — was that, because of that, I could not go ahead and reduce the tariff as I wished to do. I have told the truth. The evidence —

Mrs Palmer: Will the Member give way?

Mr Bell: I have one and half minutes left.

I have told the truth, and I have put it before the public. There is a way through out of all this. It is a fact. Not only that but, within half an hour of me closing the scheme, my ministerial instruction was countermanded by Stormont Castle. There is a case of justice that lies at the heart of this. The public interest deserves to know who benefited. I will not go into the speculation of which special adviser has a boiler and which one does not or which one could have up to eight and which one does not. That is for a judge to decide, but make no mistake about this: what I told the BBC on one occasion and what I said in the House yesterday, I will tell a judge under oath the exact same information.

We serve the public. Well over 1,000 people have sent cards to me, letters to me and emails to me. I have had four people opposing me: two by calls, one by text and one by email, to the best of my knowledge as I stand. The public, I think, by a ratio of 50,000:1 of those who have contacted me, are overwhelmingly telling me, "Tell the truth". I have no doubt today, too — I will finish with this — that having told the truth, if Dr Paisley was here today, he would not leave me sitting on my own; he would be sitting beside me.

Mr Allen: Will the Member give way?

Mr Bell: My time is up, sorry.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order.

Mr Dickson: From the Alliance Party's perspective, it is important that we get to the bottom of the RHI scandal. This debacle has completely and utterly removed public confidence in the institutions of government at Stormont and, in my view, undermined the credibility of the two political parties that have

formed the Government. It is vital that we get to the end point of the discussion. It is vital, as Mr Bell says, that we get a public inquiry, that it is all there and that, in the terms of the motion, no impediment holds back the results of the inquiry.

I welcome some of the words that have been spoken this morning by some DUP Members. Mr Stalford certainly recognised the need to end the drip-feed. He also said that RHI should be brought into the public domain. I welcome that. It is just sad that, on reflection, it has taken his party so long and that, perhaps, some of his colleagues still wish to resist some elements of this and have not managed to bring themselves to that point. I recognise that there are some who feel the weight of responsibility of the situation that their party has placed them in. Perhaps we are beginning to see that some DUP Members are beginning to recognise the challenge that this has brought to democracy, openness and probity in Northern Ireland and that, just because it can no longer be party before all else, the public have to come first. The public have a right to know and to see, and we have a right and a privilege to deliver, open and transparent government in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Palmer: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that in the interest of good governance it is important to ascertain who made the determinations not to open the risk registers in DETI and in DFP? Was it because Westminster was picking up the tab? Does he also agree with the concerns raised today that the permanent secretary did not move to mitigate?

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

Mr Dickson: Thank you, and I thank Mrs Palmer for her comments. I agree that many questions need to be answered and that they can only be answered in one place, which is in an impartial, appropriately set inquiry into these matters. I know that Mr Agnew wanted to come in, and I am happy to give way to him as well.

Mr Agnew: I thank Mr Dickson for giving way. I come back to his point about the DUP's new-found support for a public inquiry. That was its position while still in the Government and, indeed, while Sinn Féin was still taking a role in the Government. The DUP could then, through one of its Ministers, have proposed a public inquiry at the Executive and forced Sinn Féin's hand. Sinn Féin would have been forced to

agree or disagree to that. The DUP chose not to do it, so its claims are disingenuous.

Mr Dickson: I do not disagree.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: Yes.

Mr Stalford: Would the Member agree that, had a DUP Minister done so, Mr Agnew and others would have led the charge against it and said that such an inquiry was corrupted because a DUP Minister was doing it? You would not have been happy with anything that we would have said.

Mr Dickson: That is certainly not my stance. Any Minister is free and able to bring an appropriate inquiry — a free, open public inquiry — under the Inquiries Act to the Chamber. They will not find us wanting when it comes to delivering that inquiry. I do not mind which Minister brings it, whether it is one of the ex-Ministers of Sinn Féin, who are not even here this morning, or one of yours. Of course, you will receive criticism, but the right thing to do is to have that inquiry. It is still not too late. You can call it today. Your Ministers can set up that inquiry today; you do not require the consent of your partners in Government.

Mr Stalford: Briefly, is that a commitment that, if a DUP Minister were to do that, you would support it?

Mr Dickson: Of course the Alliance Party will support a public inquiry in accordance with the motion today. That is why I expect you to vote for it.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: I will.

Mr Swann: Does the Member also agree that the Justice Minister could do the inquiry as well at any time if she so desired?

Mr Dickson: The technical nature or the nuts and bolts of an inquiry are a very interesting debate. However, what the public want to know today is when a judge-led, open, public inquiry will commence in Northern Ireland. They do not really mind who brings it; they want it to be brought on so that people like Mr Bell and others can go to that inquiry and give their answers and the public can finally get their truth. That is what they are looking for. That is

what they deserve. That is what Northern Ireland wants today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I congratulate Mr Dickson on achieving a record number of interventions.

Mr Smith: I appreciate that this is a long and complex motion. I will focus on a couple of key clauses. The motion highlights "mounting public concern" and "damage caused to public confidence". Those words do not do justice to the anger and frustration that people genuinely feel about this scandal. It is a scandal, as we have heard from Mr Bell. It has brought down these institutions. It has led to an unnecessary and expensive election that is unwanted by the public. It has damaged the reputation of Northern Ireland nationally and internationally. It could and should have been avoided. Even as recently as Christmas, the then First Minister could have avoided the current crisis by not taking an arrogant and high-handed approach to this scandal and instead taking her share of responsibility for this failure.

I believe that the Department's permanent secretary, Andrew McCormick, said at the Economy Committee yesterday that the mistake in the original scheme was a policy mistake. Who makes policy? Ministers make policy. He was very clear about where the responsibility lies.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Mr Smith: Yes.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much. I take us back to a comment that was made earlier by Mr Dunne, who said that there was no proper management in place and no management review by DETI. The Minister at that time in DETI was Arlene Foster.

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

Mr Smith: I thank the Member for the intervention. I totally agree. The changes that were proposed by the Economy Minister yesterday basically put in the tiering and controls that were, inexplicably, removed under Arlene Foster's watch as ETI Minister, as you rightly said. If, as Mr McCormick suggests — he should know — it was a policy mistake, it reinforces Mrs Foster's responsibility.

Mrs Little Pengelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Smith: Yes.

Mrs Little Pengelly: Does the Member also accept that, in the evidence from the officials to the Committee, they clearly indicated that their recommendation to Minister Foster at that time was that the safeguards were not in place? It was not that Minister Foster, when she was economy Minister, removed them; it was the recommendation from officials that they were absent.

Mr Smith: I take that point on board, but the bottom line is that, if we had taken on the GB policy, we would not be in the mess that we are in today. The question is this: how do the Assembly and the public get answers? As Mr Dickson asked, where is the public inquiry that we were promised by Arlene Foster last Wednesday? There has been nothing again. Accountability seems to have been punted down the road, at best until after an election. How very convenient.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I will move on to the cost of this scandal. The motion calls on:

"the Minister of Finance and the Minister of the Economy to bring forward a plan to arrest the liability to the public purse."

On 4 January this year, Mrs Foster said in the 'Belfast Telegraph':

"A lot has been made about the potential overspend. I want to make sure that doesn't happen. We plan to bring that potential cost down to zero. There will be no overspend."

I hope that the Economy Minister will continue to stand over that commitment. To give some context to the cost, I refer to a tweet that Sam McBride issued last week. This is not about a media storm. I pay tribute to the role that the media have played in this process; they have exposed the scandal in all its detail. He said in his tweet that RHI has cost taxpayers £3 million since the BBC 'Spotlight' programme, £20.5 million under this Executive and £32.4 million since the whistle-blower warned OFMDFM in January 2016. Of course, it will cost a further £6.5 million at least until the regulations come into effect on 1 April. There are also other costs that the Department is liable for. So much for zero cost.

Why have we had to wait until now for action? Is the thought of facing the electorate focusing minds? The Government have known about

this for at least a year, if not longer. The Northern Ireland Audit Office report was published in July 2016. Why oh why were proposals brought only at the last minute? It is all, I believe, to try to avoid awkward questions on the doorsteps. However, we will certainly welcome anything that plugs the £85,000 daily cost of this scandal and protects Northern Ireland's taxpayers.

11.45 am

We proposed the adjournment of yesterday's debate so that we would have more time to scrutinise the Minister's proposals effectively. I hope that we will see a proper business case, have time to allow the Examiner of Statutory Rules to look in detail at the proposals and ensure that there is a sound legal foundation for the legislation. The last thing that we want is a legal challenge, although it appears that that is already in waiting. As my colleague Steve Aiken said yesterday, I hope that the Minister will stake his position on the legal validity of his proposals.

I suppose that we should be grateful that the arrogant response to the scandal has started to wane. The penny appears finally to have dropped that the public anger in response to the scandal is genuine and widely held and that the usual tactics to distract attention will not work. The last-minute action brought yesterday appears to be designed to be a short-term fix ahead of an election campaign. While we hope that public money can be saved, that does not get the DUP off the hook. We must have a public inquiry.

Finally, the whole mess is summed up by the recent fire in Fermanagh, where eight boilers in a shed overheated. It is a scandal — incompetence at best. Northern Ireland deserves so much better. At least people will now have the opportunity to pass their judgement on the scandal.

Mr Poots: I appreciate the opportunity to speak on the issue. There are a lot of people who have culpability: two ETI Ministers; the officials who drafted the scheme; the specialist consultants who were brought in; Ofgem; and the Assembly Committee that oversaw it. Everybody — everybody — has culpability in this. We owe the public an apology for devising a scheme that was not fit for purpose. An important message that needs to be got out there is this: we devised a scheme that was not fit for purpose, we regret that and we need to fix it. That should be the focus of the Assembly

and everyone in it. We need to rectify the mistake and move on.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Poots: Yes, Mr Beggs.

Mr Beggs: The Member has given a list of those who had some direct involvement. Would he add those who occupied the position of Finance Minister during that period, because they would have been alerted to the difficulties and could have taken action to correct, and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which should have been coordinating our Executive?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Poots: Yes, I would, and the entire Executive for that matter and the SpAds who were involved. Everybody has culpability in this. However, this is what I am coming to: the motion targets one individual — the First Minister, who was Arlene Foster. Arlene Foster did not devise the scheme. She was presented with it. She did not ask for it to be changed by civil servants so that it was different from the UK one. She was presented with a scheme and told, "This is the best way forward for Northern Ireland". She accepted the advice of the energy division, which devised it after input from all the specialist consultants and Ofgem. Here we have a fixation with a hate campaign against Arlene Foster. I say clearly that Arlene Foster brought in tens of thousands of jobs, in conjunction with Invest NI, to Northern Ireland during her period as ETI Minister. Northern Ireland had the second-highest success rate in bringing in inward investment in the United Kingdom. The only place beating us was the south-east of England. Every other region in the United Kingdom was trailing in the wake of Northern Ireland when Arlene Foster was ETI Minister and was out there bringing jobs back to Northern Ireland, yet Members are fixated with a hate campaign against her.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. There was one question posed by Sinéad Bradley and Robin Swann, neither of whom is in the Chamber. They have had to go out; maybe they are as busy as me — I do not know. The question that they asked was this: "What about the 880 applications created during the run in the autumn?", as if there were some sort of sinister plot. It could have been something as simple as Amber Rudd closing the renewables obligation certificates (ROCs) scheme a year early creating a run on the RHI scheme, because people were concerned that it

too would close early. Of course, the Minister at that time was Jonathan Bell, and he knows all about the ROC issue at that time.

Mr Poots: It is absolutely true that Amber Rudd moved early and that that created all sorts of issues and problems. There were issues about wind energy as well that we had to close early. Had that not been the case — I know that Mr Frew worked hard to ensure that it was not the case, as indeed did Mr McGlone — we would have been in a worse position.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Member very much for giving way. He talks about the good work that Mrs Foster has done as First Minister. I would expect no less of her than doing her job, however, if she had done her job as Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, she should have seen the difference between the GB scheme and the Northern Ireland scheme. If you are over the jot and tittle, that is exactly what happens. That does not seem to have been the case. Does the Member accept that?

Mr Poots: The Member gets back to this "Get rid of Arlene" campaign. Ofgem did not see it, the officials did not see it, the specialist consultants did not see it and the Committee, which had Alliance members, did not see it. Nobody saw it, but Arlene Foster has to take the hit on it all. Arlene Foster brought in tens of thousands of jobs as ETI Minister. She was a hugely successful ETI Minister and has been a hugely successful First Minister. The hate campaign brought about by all of the other Members here needs to stop. They need to stop the hate campaign against Arlene Foster.

Mr Dickson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Mr Poots might like to reflect on his comment that the Alliance Party had a member on the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment: for the record, the Alliance Party did not have a member on the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Poots: I am happy to have that clarification. That is not an issue.

We are happy for a public inquiry to take place because, with all of this "He said, she said" —

Mr Allister: You are the man who said, "No public inquiry".

Mr Poots: I do not want a public inquiry of the nature of Chilcot or of the nature of Saville, and I explained that in the last speech that I made on the issue. We are happy for a full public investigation to be led by a judge. We want it

done quickly, and I would love to have the information out before an election and stop all of this "He said, she said" trial by media and the hate campaign being imposed on us by the other politicians against Arlene Foster because she is much too successful a politician for their liking. She is far too popular with the public, so let us damn Arlene Foster and get rid of her because she is much too great a politician for you to contend with.

Ms Mallon: For the record, Mr Poots, I do not hate Arlene Foster; I do not hate anyone.

The timeline of the introduction of the scheme and the deliberate intervention to alter the scheme and to remove the cost controls, signed off by the Minister Arlene Foster, is well documented. The number of warnings personally given to Arlene Foster and to the Department in question is well documented. The DUP talks about understanding public anger. They talk about sharing public anger, but what they have refused to do is to take responsibility for the part that they have played in it. What they have done is engage in a blame game: it was the whistle-blower's fault; it was the civil servants' fault; it was the consultants' fault; it was the media's fault, and it still is when we listen to the contributions that have been made thus far; or it is the Opposition's fault, and, when we raised valid questions about who knew what and when and about what they did and who was responsible and should be held accountable, we were accused of misogyny. Mr Frew accuses us today of wanting to engage in a bloodfest. On top of that, we have Mr Bell's account of events versus Mrs Foster's account of events. Wherever the truth lies — a public inquiry will determine where the truth lies — the unquestionable truth is that this is a DUP-created mess of epic proportions.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Ms Mallon: In one second.

As Mr Smith has outlined and as Sam McBride tweeted, this DUP scandal has cost the taxpayer £3 million since 'Spotlight' was broadcast. It has cost the taxpayer over £32 million since the whistle-blower warned the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in January 2016, and it continues to cost the taxpayer £85,000 every day.

A second unquestionable truth in all of this is that the situation has been fuelled and pushed to this brink because of the arrogance of the

DUP in their response and their defiance when being held to account.

As other Members have said, the DUP has finally begun to realise and wake up to this fact, hence the shift in tone, the move to being more contrite and the U-turn articulated so blatantly today by Mr Poots that it is now in favour of a public inquiry.

The third unquestionable truth, and then I will let Members in, is that under this Executive, the scandal has cost the taxpayer over £20 million. The DUP created this mess but is a partner in government with Sinn Féin. There is joint authority and joint responsibility. The Executive parties knew about this scandal for well over a year — some of us could argue, much longer than that — and yet they said nothing.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Ms Mallon: One second. They said nothing, but they became very vocal and frantic when the 'Spotlight' programme threw this into the public domain. Sinn Féin, in particular, became vocal only when it could see the public backlash. Up to that point, it tried to keep it from the public. That is the truth. I will let Mr Nesbitt in.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank Ms Mallon for letting me in. She will have heard Mr Poots twice enumerate a long list of those who allegedly missed the flaw in the renewable heat incentive scheme, but, on neither occasion, did he include special advisers.

Mr Stalford: He did.

Mr Nesbitt: I did not hear him say special advisers. Does the Member agree that that raises the question of whether they missed it or exploited it?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Mallon: All Departments need to be put under scrutiny, as do all Ministers and all special advisers. That is why the SDLP has consistently called for a public inquiry. We have nothing to fear from the questions of who knew what, when they knew it and what they did about it. Sinn Féin, a joint partner in government, knew about this for a year and said nothing until the public started to get very angry about it. On the airwaves today, a member of Sinn Féin derided this debate on such a critical issue, describing it as a "meaningless" discussion. That sums it up, and

it tells the public who is genuinely exercised and outraged by all of this. It is very clear that we will see attempt after attempt to distract from all of this, because we could have been several weeks into a public inquiry and saved the public £85,000 every day. People need to face up to the fact that when you are in power, the buck stops with you. You are responsible, which is why you get the big money, and you should be held to account.

Mr Mullan: I welcome the opportunity to participate in today's debate concerning very hastily brought forward regulations that attempt to mitigate spend on the botched renewable heat incentive scheme. I do not need to remind anyone that the unregulated and uncapped RHI cash for ash scheme is indeed the biggest scandal ever to hit this country. It is the biggest scandal ever in the history of devolution, and it has left a monumental black hole in the Stormont finances to the tune of £500 million. The scandal has driven these institutions and our Government to collapse.

Make no mistake about it: the ousted First Minister, Arlene Foster, implemented the scheme under the concept of ministerial responsibility, so she is culpable. There was a flawed tariff in place, no cost controls or progress reviews, limited inspections and very little regulation. Finally, as far back as 2013, there was a complete failure to act on a whistle-blower's warning. Four years later, it is the DUP that brings these proposals to us in what I regard as merely a simple exercise in face-saving.

How many millions of pounds of taxpayers' money has been wasted since the scheme was introduced? We know that £30 million has been squandered this financial year so far, but the RHI scandal goes much further. Some very serious allegations have been made around corruption at the heart of the Executive. It is my belief that by no means do we have all the information concerning the RHI scheme out in the open. Departmental documents have been hidden from view, even from the Public Accounts Committee's (PAC) investigation. We do not know who the recipients of the scheme are, who benefited, and whether supporters of a certain political party reaped heavy rewards from the RHI scheme. It is ironic that the Economy Minister, Mr Hamilton, seemed very content —

12.00 noon

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mullan: I am sorry; I will not take any interventions because you have had long enough to say and do the right thing. You have not done so up to this point and you will certainly not take advantage of me to make any political points.

It is ironic that the Economy Minister, Mr Hamilton, seemed very content yesterday to remove regulations, which are open to legal challenge, and he will not publish the details of the recipients of the scheme due to the prospect of the same legal challenge. What has the DUP got to hide?

These are all very serious questions that have gone unanswered so far and the public deserve that they be answered immediately. That is why, from day one, the SDLP called for the First Minister to step aside during a public inquiry into this botched energy scheme that would be devoid of any political influence or conflict of interest. After all, the scheme will cost the taxpayer £85,000 per day or £600,000 a week. What could the money do for our failing hospitals and for our GPs? We heard only this morning of the closure of a GP surgery. I think that it was in County Down, but I am not sure. What could that money not have done to help in those situations?

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mullan: Very quickly. *[Interruption.]*

Mr McGlone: If Members would just hold off on the far side, they will respect the point that I am going to make. While supporting entirely that the First Minister should step aside during a public inquiry, likewise, I am sure that the Member will support the view that any other Minister giving evidence about his or her Department should step aside while they give evidence to that public inquiry?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Mullan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for his comments and I agree totally. I was asking what the money could possibly have been used for had it not been squandered to the extent that it was. Hospitals and our GPs are facing crisis point and our roads are in a dilapidated condition. In my area, work was recently done on the railway line, which caused the roads around my area to be churned into quagmires. That has yet to be resolved, sorted and fixed. Money like this could be better spent and used for local projects and issues.

Sinn Féin is no martyr either in all of this. The party talks about equality, a bill of rights and dealing with the past —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member conclude his remarks?

Mr Mullan: — yet it agreed to a Programme for Government. Mr Speaker, as I am making a winding-up speech, I thought that I had 10 minutes — *[Interruption.]* — I am not making a winding-up speech. OK. I will conclude and say that —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Agnew: We have two possible scenarios. Scenario 1 is that Arlene Foster steps aside as First Minister for a temporary period, and scenario 2 is that she refuses but the result is that she is forced out of her position as First Minister, as has transpired.

In scenario 1, we could have had an agreed inquiry into the RHI scandal. We could have had an agreed proposal to protect public money. We could have had stable government.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member take a brief intervention?

Mr Agnew: I will give way in a moment.

What we have is scenario 2, where, as I say, Arlene Foster is still not the First Minister. Whether that will be temporary or permanent, we will see. We have a proposal from Simon Hamilton on protecting public money that I would argue is dodgy at best. We have no inquiry, and although I think that it is increasingly unlikely, we do still have Ministers and still have that opportunity. We have institutions that are on the brink of collapse. I have to ask the question: given that, in both these scenarios, Arlene Foster is, at least temporarily, no longer the First Minister, what has her intransigence achieved? Why are we facing political crisis? I will give way to Mr Stalford.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I fear that he is engaging in a rewriting of history, because when this was debated, the SDLP motion that was brought forward to exclude the First Minister from office, a device that hinged on a measure that was created for when people's proxies were suspected of engaging in paramilitary behaviour, that was prejudging any inquiry. The Member knows that. Now, post-19

December, the Member and others are pretending that they were engaging in fairness when the truth of the matter is that — if not necessarily in his case, certainly in others' — the intent was not fair: it was malicious.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for his intervention. I would argue, and have argued, that Arlene Foster could have taken the lead. She could have done as her predecessor, Peter Robinson, did and actually say, "I will step aside. I will take that decision". I do not agree with the method of inquiry in the Peter Robinson case, but it is a sad scenario when I am saying, "Remember the good old days when we had Peter Robinson? There was an honourable guy". *[Laughter.]* It is a worrying time.

Mr Allister: They are not saying that. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Agnew: I think that it is a worrying time. I ask the question: what has been achieved? What did this insistence on saying no and refusing to step aside achieve? All that was being asked was that Arlene Foster do what would be expected of any employee who was under suspicion. All that was being asked was indeed what Mr Bell was expected to accept by his party; suspension without prejudice pending investigation. But Arlene Foster is no ordinary employee: she is the leader of unionism. Some leadership. This is what it has led to: the Assembly and institutions, which have taken hard work to get up and running and on which Northern Ireland's future depends, on the brink of collapse; no Budget; no Programme for Government; and no solution to RHI. That is what her leadership has achieved. That is where we are.

I have sought to be positive and constructive in my contributions since I was elected to the House. Today, I have sought to do that. Following yesterday's debate on Simon Hamilton's proposals, which I have been clear that my party cannot accept, I have written to the Finance Minister and asked him to investigate the possibility of a windfall tax. The Green Party proposes that there be a 100% tax on any payment that is owed to RHI recipients over and above the cost of wood pellets. That would ensure that there would be no incentive to produce heat without use and no cash for ash. The proposal, in my view and in the advice that I have been given, would be legal because it would not retrospectively change the contracts of recipients but would do what any

Government are entitled to do; introduce a tax on windfall payments that have been received. I believe that the proposal is fair, I believe that it is legal and I believe that it is a long-term solution, unlike the one-year proposal that we had from the Economy Minister yesterday. We still have time, albeit very limited time, to protect public money. I call on the Finance Minister —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member conclude his remarks?

Mr Agnew: — to work with his colleagues to achieve that.

Mr Carroll: I do not need to remind the House how deeply angry and frustrated the public are that £600 million of public money has been wasted on a scheme that was designed from the start to fund private companies to get cash for ash. When we put it into context, in the wake of Red Sky, NAMA and the scandal around the social investment fund, it is clear that corruption is at the very heart of Stormont.

In the last few weeks, I have been knocking on doors and speaking to people in my constituency. People are well aware of the corruption that exists in this place, and they are absolutely fed up with it. They are fed up being told that there is nothing that can be done about waiting lists in our hospitals. People have to wait two, three or four years to get even the most basic operations.

They are fed up being forced to go out on strike for a respectable wage, be they teachers, nurses or public-sector workers; fed up when their benefits are placed on the chopping block and not knowing whether the bedroom tax is going to affect them this year, next year or whenever; fed up that, at the same time as the DUP was squandering up to £600 million, the rest of us were being told to tighten our belts; and fed up that, just months after thousands of people marched through Belfast city centre and other cities against the cuts detailed in the Stormont House Agreement, Sinn Féin and the DUP began implementing exactly those cuts.

The DUP and Sinn Féin Executive have been committed to a programme of austerity and cuts. The RHI scheme is only the latest example of how the Executive put the interests of the wealthy before the interests of the vast majority here. Their proposed corporation tax cut on top of RHI will only give another handout to big companies and the rich. The corporation tax cut will lose around £300 million a year from the block grant. When added to the £600 million loss to RHI, on top of the £700 million

agreed by the Executive to make 20,000 public-sector workers redundant in the Fresh Start Agreement, you get £1.5 billion. In one way or another, it is £1.5 billion redirected away from people who need it most. The £1.5 billion could have been spent on waiting lists, jobs, mental health services, topping up benefits and protecting vulnerable people.

Instead, we see cuts, cuts and warm Ferraris. What we need to see now is the former First Minister Arlene Foster and everyone else responsible for the burn to earn scandal held to account. We need a public inquiry to establish exactly who those people are. On top of that, we need a full list of the beneficiaries of the RHI scheme, and that should be published. All the contracts awarded through RHI, such as that to the Charles Hurst Ferrari dealership, to collect money for the next 18 years should be rescinded and ended immediately.

We need to see the money wrongly paid out through RHI being paid back into the public purse and put into public services. Anything short of those measures will not deliver the kind of accountability that the public want and deserve. We need to see accountability. As we now know, despite warning after warning about the cost of the scheme, Arlene Foster refused to listen to those calls. When she wrote to the banks outlining that tariffs for companies would be protected, she urged banks to:

"look favourably on approaches from businesses".

This is what is at the heart of the scandal: designing policies that are in the interests of corporations, in the belief that increasing benefits for corporations and reducing their taxes will lead to a trickle-down of wealth. We have decades of evidence that trickle-down economics does not work. It only makes the rich richer.

We found out yesterday the scandalous news that six billionaires own more wealth than the poorest 50% of the world's population. What a disgusting state of affairs.

What a disgraceful state of affairs we have right here, in our own backyard. We should ask ourselves what kind of society the Executive are creating, where people are dying on the streets while Ferraris are heated almost free of charge.

12.15 pm

Mr Speaker: Will the Member conclude his remarks?

Mr Carroll: The RHI scandal may be heralded as the straw that broke the camel's back, but there were deaths on our streets long before this scandal —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Carroll: — and no one threatened to bring down the House. What kind of status quo are we being asked to return to by the big parties?

Mr Allister: The case for a public inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005 is unanswerable. The question is this: why have we not already got one? The answer, in large measure, is because the parties hitherto of government have, to this point, blocked such an inquiry. Indeed, with considerable vehemence, we were told by Mr Poots, just four weeks ago:

"Get the message ... there will not be a public inquiry".— [Official Report (Hansard), 19 December 2016, p47, col 1].

There is nothing like a looming election to focus minds and to try to get on the right side of public opinion. Now we are told that the DUP supports a public inquiry. Good. In fact, we were told, this day last week, by Mrs Foster that one would be announced within 24 hours. Where is it? Was that just another sound bite to get through another day?

The case for a public inquiry is overwhelming. There are some things that are —

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for giving way. As I indicated in the speech I made four weeks ago, the Saville-type or Chilcot-type inquiry is not in anybody's interest. If you go back to how I dealt with pseudomonas, for example, you will see that we had an inquiry done and dusted in a matter of months, whereas the hyponatraemia inquiry, which the Member rightly asked a question about, has cost £15 million and, seven years later, has not delivered the answers. That is not the way forward. We want the truth.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Allister: There never was a need for a protracted inquiry, because there are —

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Not just yet.

There are very net issues to be addressed. This is not a Saville or anything else; this is something that can be done in a few months at most. It is a very focused issue; indeed, there are some issues for which, it is abundantly clear, there are already answers. There are issues for which answers are definitely needed, but, for example, there is no dispute that it was Arlene Foster and Arlene Foster alone who signed off the scheme and decided, as a policy, to take out of the GB scheme the tiering in the tariff, with disastrous consequences. That is indisputable. She alone decided that. Yes, there are areas to be explored; some of them go to the heart of the matter and the heart of the potential corruption. Why was the date of 1 October 2015 — the end date of the old scheme and the start date of the amended scheme with tariffs — changed? Who changed it? At whose behest? At whose direction? For whose benefit? Those are the questions that go to the heart of the matter.

Mr Bell has shed some light on that by indicating that compulsion was applied; indeed, he said this morning that, within half an hour of him deciding to close the scheme, his instruction was countermanded by Stormont Castle. If that relates to 1 October, that goes to the heart of the matter. Why would there be such a countermanding?

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes, indeed.

Mr Bell: That related to the closure of the scheme, not the reduction in the tariff.

Mr Allister: Fine. I am glad of the clarification.

It seems that there was a vested interest somewhere about the closure of the scheme, and, going by what Mr Bell suggests, that vested interest rested in Stormont Castle. Is that not exactly the sort of thing that we need to have ventilated and exposed to the glare of a public inquiry? Maybe that is why, until this moment, there has been great reluctance from the primary party of government to have a public inquiry. If there are countermanding instructions emanating from Stormont Castle —

Mr Speaker: The Member will conclude his remarks.

Mr Allister: — that might well be a reason, but it is not a reason to deny the public the truth, and that is what must be obtained.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Eamonn McCann, I remind him that he has only four minutes. If he takes an intervention, he will not get an extra minute.

Mr E McCann: Mr Speaker, I take that as a warning to everybody else not to ask me to give way; in light of what the Speaker has said, I will not.

There were "mistakes" and "flaws"; we have heard those words here over and over again. Nobody spotted the flaw in the scheme. The regulator did not spot it and departmental officials did not spot it, the implication being, "How could you expect a poor, simple politician to spot it when all those other people missed it?". There might be an explanation for that. When we think of a flaw, we usually think of something that has deteriorated, something that was missed and so on. The reason why nobody spotted the flaw is that there was no flaw in the system. There was no flaw at all. This was deliberate, and it was conscious. Apparently, we cannot accuse people of criminality, fraud and all the rest of it. I do not accuse any individual of being a criminal or a fraudster; what I say is this: it is a flat fact that there was criminality and fraud. The task is to get to the bottom of that and to hold those responsible to account.

The scandal that has emerged does not have to do with just the RHI scheme. We will not go into all of the other things, which are relevant, going back to Red Sky and the rest of it. We will hear a bit more about all of those things. Remember this: when NAMA comes down the road in a few months and the scandalous facts of that come out into the open, we will have another crisis. Had we got over this crisis, the NAMA crisis would have come along before the end of this year and put us in the same position.

We will go away, stand in an election and come back. We are told over and over again by commentators — sharp, acerbic commentators — that there is no real point in having the election because everybody will come back in the same numbers — at least, the DUP and Sinn Féin will come back in the same numbers, so nothing will have been solved. The DUP seems to think that. The DUP takes its voters for fools and treats its electorate like fools. It uses them as voting fodder and operates on the assumption that, no matter what it does, come election day, it will be able to rally people to the flag. Well, we shall see. It is possible to reach a tipping point on these things, you know.

People Before Profit invites any ordinary Protestant person who has voted DUP in the

past to look at the representation that they have been given. Look at who has been represented by the DUP. Is it them? We are talking about who is responsible for these hundreds of thousands and millions of pounds and so forth. Meanwhile, back in the real world, people are named and shamed in front of their neighbours because, allegedly, they have conned a thousand quid from the public purse by doing the double or something like that. We have government websites asking people to phone and tell them and the police who is defrauding them and asking people to tout on their neighbours in relation to social security and the rest of it. Meanwhile, major crime goes on.

We have learned a few other things in all this. We have certainly learned about Mrs Foster, Sinn Féin and the rest of the DUP. Let us remember, when we look back at all this, that when the scandal first emerged both the DUP and Sinn Féin were adamantly against a public inquiry. Sinn Féin was against it. Then it put out a statement saying that it was in favour of it. Then it withdrew that statement and said, "Oh, that was a typographical error". Do Sinn Féin and the DUP take us all for fools? They do in a sense because they believe that all they have to do is —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member conclude his remarks?

Mr E McCann: — play to the expectations of their own community, and it does not matter what else they do.

Mr Aiken: I am sorry, Gerry. Apologies for that, but let us crack on.

Before I summarise all the contributions to the debate, I thank everybody who has been involved in it, particularly for the vigour and clear direction that they have put into the discussion and for raising some of the key areas that have come out of this. Before I add my clear support for the motion, I will make a few pertinent remarks about helping to restore confidence in the institutions and, above all, get to the truth. Many of the Members who spoke talked to these points.

First, given Simon Hamilton's push for the statutory rule yesterday and for the need to expedite the haemorrhaging of funding of £85,000 a day from our very constrained Budget, he has, as Mr Dickson clearly pointed out, the opportunity, even at this late stage, to call for a public inquiry. I would like him to do that at this late stage; set it up and get it

moving. He can do the right thing. Do the right thing now.

We also talked about the First Minister standing aside without prejudice and about how that could have not only helped us to get to the bottom of the RHI scandal but, probably more importantly, restored confidence in this institution and in the Government of Northern Ireland. We have turned what was a financial crisis into an existential threat to the whole of the institutions and what is happening in Northern Ireland. We need to move on from this. There was an opportunity for leadership and direction and that has, very sadly for everybody here, been missed.

I will go on to some of the comments. First, thanks very much indeed to Claire for her excellent and eloquent introduction. It is the first time that I have heard the 12 days of Christmas approach. It is vital that the judge be appointed by the Lord Chief Justice; it cannot be by the Attorney General. All of us at this end of the Assembly very clearly say that as well.

Thank you very much indeed, Emma Little Pengelly, for your contribution, but we were unsure what you were saying about a public inquiry. Do you want a public inquiry? Please say. Yes?

Thank you very much indeed, Robin Swann, for your contribution. I know the constraints that you are under as the Chair of the PAC, but I think everybody at this end of the House very clearly gives thanks to you for your chairmanship and to the PAC for its hard work and for what it has done to bring the issues to the fore.

Like Stephen Farry, I, too, am particularly surprised that HM Treasury is not interested in what is going on, because the issue here is not just the potential £0.6 billion but the £1.18 billion cost to the UK taxpayer — and, ladies and gentlemen, we are all UK taxpayers, so I am surprised that this is not of interest going forward.

I fully support and agree with Gordon Dunne's comments about what is going on. The lack of business process, risk management and even basic project management smacks of something as bad as the Ministry of Defence used to do. It is like something that would have happened 20 years ago. There is a definite failure in our mechanisms of government. I know that we have all called for the political side of it to be addressed, but something desperately has to be done about the state and functioning of our Civil Service, because, quite

clearly, at least in the Department for the Economy, formerly DETI, it is not fit for purpose going forward.

12.30 pm

Thank you very much indeed, Gordon Lyons, for your contribution. I was also interested in my honourable friend Mr Beggs's intervention. We were talking about the returns that we were looking at. Whereas in Northern Ireland we were getting returns from the RHI initiative of somewhere in the region of 84%, the returns in GB were around 7.4%. There is obviously something to be looked at.

Thank you very much indeed, Christopher Stalford. We missed you. We enjoy your contributions. It was good to hear from you again. Thank you, and we will miss you. *[Laughter.]* We do; we enjoy your contributions.

Mr Stalford: The Member is very welcome, and I hope that the good people of Belfast South will — *[Interruption.]*

[Laughter.]

Mr Aiken: I will move on to more serious issues. Sinéad, you are quite right. Sinéad Bradley pointed out the fact that there is a complete lack of clarity of thinking and that there is fraudulent activity, or suspected fraudulent activity, but there is something in this that needs to be investigated, and I will return to that later on.

Paul Frew made a contribution; thank you very much indeed. *[Laughter.]* Then we moved on to Mr Bell.

Mr Mullan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Aiken: Certainly.

Mr Mullan: Does the Member agree that the fishing analogy that Mr Frew used in his contribution was somewhat unwise when he referred to the feeding frenzy and to members of my party being caught on the hook? Does he agree that the only frenzy that I am aware of — I am sure he is aware of it too — is the frenzy of people who tried to sign up to this botched scheme in the spike when hundreds of people availed themselves of it?

Mr Aiken: Thank you very much indeed, and yes, I would agree with that.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Aiken: I will.

Mr Frew: That is a very important point. It is reckless for the message to go out here today that there was some sort of frenzy by people trying to get onto this scheme for any reason other than that they wanted to be part of the incentive scheme. These are reputable businesses that decided to go forward with the scheme because they were maybe advised to do so by suppliers or other businesses or accountants. It is very dangerous and reckless to say here today that those people tied up in that spike were doing anything other than carrying on their business.

Mr Aiken: I thank Mr Frew. Thank you very much for leading me in, because I was about to talk about the contribution from Mr Bell and, particularly, the concerns about the roles of SpAds. If ever we needed an indication of why we need a public inquiry, what was going on? Who was running the Government at the time? Was it the SpAds or was it the Ministers? Was it being properly and accountably looked at? These are really serious questions that need to be answered.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Aiken: Yes.

Dr Farry: Just briefly on that point, does the Member recognise that there is no such concept as a rogue SpAd? Even if a SpAd is acting unilaterally, by definition they owe their appointment solely to the Minister and the Minister is fully accountable for everything the SpAd does.

Mr Aiken: Thank you for that intervention. Yes, that is the normal course, custom and practice of the role of special advisers. However, for some strange reason, here in Northern Ireland in our Sinn Féin/DUP SpAdocracy, we seem to have completely missed that point.

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Aiken: No, I want to continue on.

Philip Smith's contribution was very clear and concise and brought out some of the most important and key issues going forward. I was interested in Mr Poots's comments about culpability. You are quite right; we need to look at the whole chain. One of the things we looked at considerably in the military was the chain of command, all the way from the top to the bottom. All of it needs to be looked at.

Thank you very much, Nichola, for your contribution. Indeed, there are unquestionable truths. What we need to do and be very clear about is to deal with these unquestionable truths and that can only be led by a public inquiry.

Thank you very much, Steven, for supporting our plan for moving towards a windfall tax. We should also explore the issue of the rating scheme to reduce that as well. We have not had the chance to look at any of these issues in sufficient detail, and we need to do that as well.

Thank you very much, Gerry and Eamonn, but there is definitely a clear issue of accountability here and where it lies. Everybody in Northern Ireland is asking for the answers to this, and these are key questions. These are things that we need to talk about as well.

Jim Allister's contribution was eloquent but very clear on the reasons why we definitely need a public inquiry.

The question again to be asked, while the Minister is still here, is this: why does he not call for a public inquiry now?

With my final comments, I will talk to a serious matter that the Economy Minister raised yesterday and that has been alluded to during the debate, and it is the question of potential fraud. It would be no surprise that matters involving many millions of pounds—

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr Aiken: — would, in normal circumstances, and definitely in Great Britain, require the attention of the Serious Fraud Office. Today, as a party, we have written to the PSNI to ask what actions it is taking to investigate this scandal —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Aiken: — now that the Minister has clearly stated his suspicions of fraud. I ask that we support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the mounting public concern relating to the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scheme and the serious allegations of incompetence, corruption and abuse; further recognises the damage caused

to public confidence in these devolved democratic institutions; calls for the establishment of a public inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005, to be chaired by a judicial figure proposed by the Lord Chief Justice; believes that the First Minister should stand aside pending publication of the final inquiry report; further believes that the terms of reference should include the development and operation of the scheme, any matter in relation to policy, financial, operation and compliance, the role and conduct of relevant persons and organisations, assess if there were breaches of any relevant code, public standards or employment contract, the response to and treatment of persons who raised concerns, if any person with a potential conflict of interest acted to their own benefit or the benefit of others, assess all RHI applications and report on any actions to be taken in respect of suspected fraud, the suspension and recovery of payments and the future operation of the scheme, make such recommendations as the inquiry believes necessary, including in relation to any issue of potential malfeasance in public office or of suspected criminal activity identified; believes that the inquiry should issue a final report within six months of its commencement, with the provision for interim reports at least on a two monthly basis; further calls for all inquiry reports to be published in full upon completion without requiring the agreement of any Executive Minister, the Executive or the Secretary of State, with copies of any report lodged in the Assembly Library; calls for any case of suspected fraud identified to be referred to the PSNI; and further calls on the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy to bring forward a plan to arrest the liability to the public purse.

Failure of the Executive

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours 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. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Nesbitt: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the grave consequences for the people of Northern Ireland of the failure of the Executive to agree a Budget and Estimates for the financial year 2017-18, the failure of the Executive to endorse a Programme for Government and the continuing failure of the Executive to safeguard the interests of the people of Northern Ireland following the result of the EU referendum.

Once upon a time, there was a young boy who was put into an institutional home, not because he had done anything wrong but because his mother was not married, and in those days that was deemed a problem. His problem was that, in this institution, those who had been charged to nurture, love and care for him abused him physically, mentally and psychologically. As he looked around him, he saw that there were other boys and girls being abused. As he grew older, he realised there were many other institutional homes in which this was happening.

Successive Governments ignored him. Then an Executive came along that said, "We understand. I tell you what we'll do for you. We will find a judge and ask him to conduct an inquiry". That judge is Sir Anthony Hart, and in three days' time — on Friday — he will tell those victims what he thinks and what he is recommending.

The report rests in the Executive Office, however, and, to all intents and purposes, the Executive Office is shut. The people who populate Stormont Castle and run our Executive, who say that they stand up for the vulnerable and the needy, have put their own interests first, because nobody can action whatever it is that Sir Anthony Hart has recommended and will tell the victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse when he meets them in south Belfast on Friday.

Another scenario: an 18-year-old finishes her first week at work, lifts the little brown envelope that is her pay packet and meets her friend for a drink. Unfortunately, she chooses the same bar as an IRA bomber. As a consequence, her friend is killed and she spends the rest of her life in a wheelchair, unable to work, unable to earn, unable to save and unable contribute to National Insurance for her pension. Against all odds, she lives to a pensionable age. Now, she, like a couple of hundred others, is asking, "Can I have a special pension, because I have been injured and denied life opportunities through no fault of my own?" The answer from this Executive has been, "No, you may not have a special pension because, if you are having a pension, we want one for the bomber." The next time that that bomber went out to plan a bomb, it went off prematurely, and he got injured, so, perversely, they argue, "He is the same as you".

Again, it is these two big parties that say that they stand up strongly for the vulnerable and the needy in our society.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: Your colleagues would not give when I asked for an intervention in the last debate, Mr Stalford, so do not expect to take during this debate.

Mr Stalford: Suit yourself.

Mr Nesbitt: No, reap what you sow. Mr Stalford must reap what he and his colleagues sow.

Last Monday, as the implosion began and the deputy First Minister resigned, we saw final proof that, after 10 long years, the DUP and Sinn Féin are incapable of sharing power in Stormont Castle. On that very day, what was the Prime Minister doing? Mrs May was announcing her determination to tackle mental health and well-being issues in England and Wales. That is what we need. Per head of population, our mental health and well-being issues are possibly the worst in the world, partly because that is a legacy issue to some extent. I have campaigned on it since the day and hour that I got this position. Maybe we have raised the profile and have something near to agreement that it is a problem that we have to tackle, but have we tackled it? No, we have not. Thousands of our citizens woke up this morning denied a sense of purpose in life, not because they do not want it or because they do not want to work but because we are not helping them. It lies at the feet of the parties of

the Executive. It lies at Stormont Castle, where, for 10 years, those two parties have failed to find a way to do business together.

What would the victims of institutional abuse do with the £85,000 a day that is being wasted? What would the victims of the Troubles do with that money? How could that help those suffering from poor mental health and well-being? It is not an orange issue. It is not a green issue. It is an issue of right and wrong, of competence and incompetence. Yet, when you raise that issue in the Chamber and suggest that there is such a concept as ministerial responsibility, some parties now make that synonymous with hate crime and misogyny. How desperate? How embarrassing for the integrity of these institutions?

As we go into an election, Mrs May is preparing to trigger article 50. Northern Ireland remains the most affected region of the United Kingdom by our impending withdrawal from the European Union, and we remain the least prepared.

Here is the Executive's plan for Brexit — it is a blank sheet. There are no thoughts and no actions. There has been no identification of the policy options, no determination of what our priorities are and no determination of whether our priorities complement or conflict with the UK Government's. Where they conflict — they will conflict on occasions — we have a huge problem. The parties of the Executive have failed the people.

12.45 pm

It came to a head again yesterday, Mr Speaker, when you had to vacate the Chair because you were the subject of a debate, and, of course, the DUP deployed a petition of concern. That kind of sums up how Sinn Féin and the DUP have run government for the last 10 years: protect the individuals, protect the parties and never mind the country. There have been 10 years of failure, scandals, debacles and disappointments. I hope that the people have had enough. I hope that, on 2 March, the people say, "We will look to parties that want to put the country first, ahead of the party and ahead of the individuals within that party". The Ulster Unionist Party stands ready to do that. We stand ready for change. Let us come back after 2 March and put the country and the people first. Let us forget the rhetoric about standing strong for the vulnerable and the weak. Today, the victims of the Troubles and of historical institutional abuse are not so much vulnerable as angry, just as the people of this

country are justifiably angry at the incompetence and the failure of the DUP —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr Nesbitt: — and Sinn Féin over 10 long, useless years in Stormont Castle.

Dr Farry: I beg to move the following amendment:

Insert after "2017-18,"

"the failure of the Executive to set a regional rate for 2017-18,".

I support the motion. I will come to the specifics of the amendment shortly. Hopefully, it adds a specific and very pertinent example to the broad thrust of the motion.

The motion is about the failure of the Executive. In exploring that, first, we have to look back. However, in doing so, we must recognise that power-sharing and devolution are important concepts for Northern Ireland and that we should value and cherish them. They are, first, about providing a forum in which we can have reconciliation and bring the different traditions in Northern Ireland together in government. That is a very particular aspect of our situation in Northern Ireland. More generally, if we look across at what is happening in Scotland and Wales, we see that devolution is the norm within these islands, and Northern Ireland should be no different in that regard.

Power-sharing and devolution can work, but we have to recognise that, so far, it has not been working, particularly under the stewardship of the DUP and Sinn Féin. Ultimately, for power-sharing to work, it is about more than simply the right institutional design. We can, for sure, make improvements in that regard, but, ultimately, it has to be based upon trust, partnership and mutual respect. Very clearly, we do not have that in any sense whatsoever. Instead, we have had dysfunction, which has been characterised by bickering and political instability, and it has led to the situation today in which the institutions are seriously imperilled. There have been missed opportunities and things that we could have been doing to improve people's lives; there has been deadlock on a whole host of key issues, as manifested in mutual vetoes and the use of the petition of concern; and, particularly over the past number of months, increased problems around accountability, lack of transparency and, indeed, corruption and cronyism. You almost

have the impression at times that devolution, under the current model, is about carve-up and spoils for particular communities rather than about working in a coherent, cohesive way on behalf of the community as a whole.

Today, however, we meet in the context of what will now be missed opportunities to put Northern Ireland forward. An opportunity delayed may well be an opportunity missed. At a strategic level, we will not now have for quite some time a Programme for Government, an economic strategy, a social strategy, an investment strategy or a Budget — five key strategic documents that you would expect any meaningful Government to have. That is before you think through each of the individual Departments and all the various strategies and initiatives that will now go on hold. While Ministers will remain in office until the election, there seems to be a slight misunderstanding about their position, particularly the Health Minister, who said that she will make announcements and will be at her desk right through to the election. That may well be the case, but there are rules, under the purdah arrangements, as to what can and cannot be done during an election campaign. I am not sure that the penny has dropped.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does he agree that the Health Minister's comments are pretty pointless in that no Budget has been set for next year? That is the fundamental job of any Government and both the DUP and Sinn Féin have failed to do it.

Dr Farry: Indeed. I will come to that in a moment. The implications across public services of not having a Budget will be most acute in the area of health where we were expecting the most significant amount of change if things had been done correctly.

Mr Nesbitt made the point in relation to Brexit, and I will not labour it. There is an irony that we are meeting today, in the dog days of the Assembly, in the context where we have had a major speech from the UK Prime Minister and where, as stated, we have no meaningful plan from our Executive. It is worth noting that our counterparts in Scotland and Wales are meeting today to discuss the Prime Minister's statement and advance their plans to mitigate the impact on their respective jurisdictions.

There is an even more immediate issue that we have to look to, beyond what we could be doing

to realise the opportunities, and it is the issue of keeping the lights on. Elections are normally planned. We move into them in a reasonably organised way; there is an orderly winding-down of business. Let us throw our minds back some months, when we were conscious that there would be a break in the Assembly. We were rushing through a whole host of legislation, because we did not want to lose a lot of the work that had been built up in Departments. It may be that it could have been done in a more organised way than it was; nevertheless, people recognised that there was a need to get these things over the line. We had to make sure, for example, that the Budget was passed and that Budget legislation was moved through the Assembly accordingly. In the political crisis that is now before us, we are essentially pushing governance over a cliff edge. That would be bad in any context, but it is particularly bad in the context of where we are in the Budget cycle.

I have to say that there is a lot of complacency coming across from those who were formally in charge and, indeed, from the UK Government about how we can make do over the next number of weeks. Reference has been made to the fact that there is the potential under section 59 of the Northern Ireland Act for the permanent secretary to strike a Budget three days before the end of the financial year. So, we will all be saved magically. Departments will have a wee bit of cash, and things can roll on until we get our act together. Let us work on the assumption that Departments will function essentially from a standing start. That is not how things work in the real world. In reality, there has to be a lead-in process. Normally, we would be setting our Budget and the Executive would agree a Budget statement setting out the full amounts during the course of the full financial year. Indeed, some people would argue that there should be a three-year Budget rather than a one-year Budget so that we can have some proper strategic planning. Instead, we have nothing.

Flowing from that are the first Budget Bill and then the second Budget Bill, which give Departments legislative authority to spend money in that regard. Most Departments have information about their budget for the incoming financial year months in advance. They then make their own internal allocations. They think carefully about how to make the best use of their resources before indicating to arm's-length bodies and, in particular, the community and voluntary sector what budgets they will have. In this way, things can be done as efficiently and effectively as possible. In the context of a declining Budget, it is incumbent on all of us to

make sure that every penny is used to best advantage.

Instead, we will have a situation where people will be placed on protective notice, particularly when organisations do not have certainty over their budgets and there is no existing contractual relationship with government. Cuts will have to be made because accounting officers will be very loath to make any new discretionary spending commitments without certainty as to what their budget will be in the context of the position in July, whether it is a 100% or 95% budget. Even if we strike a 100% Budget some time in July, the next financial year will still be a train wreck because we have not taken a strategic approach to the Budget. Things will go missing in that regard. Important decision-making that should be happening at this point in time, around, for example, the health service, is not going to be taken forward. My colleague Paula Bradshaw will focus on that in particular detail. There are many other examples across government as well.

We have proposed the amendment around the regional rate because it is important that we focus on a particular aspect of how the legislation is framed. We have a situation where the ability of the permanent secretary of DOF to set a Budget relates to only the consolidated fund — the block grant. It does not relate to what are termed in legislation as accruing resources, which is other income that comes in to government coffers. There may be some ambiguity around some aspects of that, but aspects such as the regional rate do not count as part of what is in the purview of the permanent secretary of DOF. People are saying, "Well, we can defer the raising of the rates until as far as June or July. Let's not worry about that; sure we can catch up on ourselves and everything will be fine". However, we will have a situation where district councils are uncertain of exactly what is going to be coming their way. We will see a situation where there will be additional administrative costs in terms of Land and Property Services trying to implement this. We will also see a situation where we have greater levels of default in people's rates payments. That default could amount to many tens of millions, if not more. We are not talking about something on the margins or something that we can gently finesse; these are all things that have major financial consequences for Northern Ireland. They are not numbers on a piece of paper; they are a reference to resources that make a difference to people's lives. They allow us to improve the social and economic well-being of this society and to improve the stock of all our people.

There are consequences of us seeing government being driven over a cliff edge by Sinn Féin and the DUP. Let us not argue about who exactly is to blame; the fact is that government is going over a cliff edge because of the collective failure of those in positions of authority. We are going to see real pain for the people of Northern Ireland over the coming months.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to meet at 1.00 pm today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.57 pm.

2.00 pm

On resuming —

Oral Answers to Questions

Infrastructure

Translink: Passenger Delays

1. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he will review the strategy that Translink has in place to minimise passenger delays in the event of a breakdown of, or delays with, Northern Ireland Railways services. (AQO 903/16-21)

Mr Hazzard (The Minister for Infrastructure):

The performance of bus and rail services provided by Translink, including NI Railways (NIR), is independently monitored, and results are published twice a year. The results of the spring 2016 monitor were published on 22 September 2016 and showed that NIR exceeded the charter targets for punctuality and, overall, achieved a perfect score of 100% for reliability, which is a very creditable performance.

Detailed analysis of punctuality data is compiled per services and reviewed on a daily, weekly, monthly, 26-week and annual basis by NIR. Poorly performing services are then monitored, and action plans are developed to enhance performance. When disruption occurs, NIR acts immediately to minimise delays and return services to the planned timetable. My Department monitors performance on an ongoing basis as part of the conditions of the service agreement that it entered into with Translink in October 2015.

I am aware of a number of delays on the Derry to Coleraine line that arose in early December 2016 following the activation of new signalling. It is clear that the performance issues at that time were not satisfactory, but Translink has worked hard with the contractor to address the issues during the bedding-in period. I am also aware that, following the recent refurbishment project, the Belfast to Dublin Enterprise service experienced a series of service delays.

In response to my concerns, a joint service improvement team has been established, representing NI Railways and Irish Rail, with the objective of addressing performance issues associated with the Enterprise service. I expect to see improvements in those services.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister for his reply. Having experienced a lengthy delay on the railway and having observed at first hand the disruption to passengers and staff, I urge the Minister to have an urgent conversation with Translink about replacing the current strategy, because it is not fit for purpose.

Mr Hazzard: I regularly have conversations with Translink. We have discussed the recent delays on the Derry to Coleraine line, which the Member alluded to. The delays are down to barriers at Bellarena and a faulty track circuit at Castlerock. You go too far by suggesting that we need an entirely different approach and saying that the standard is not what it should be. I go back to my original answer: the 2016 results showed a perfect score of 100% for reliability. That is a fantastic score, and fair play to all those who achieved it.

Mrs Palmer: What action is the Minister taking, in conjunction with the PSNI and the Justice Minister, to address the constant delays on the North/South corridor at Lurgan due to security alerts?

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Member for her question. As I said, in response to my concerns, a joint service improvement team has been put in place to look at all the different aspects of how we improve the line. The team will not be looking at security issues alone, but I have no doubt that that may be something that it looks at.

Mr McNulty: Minister, in recent days, you have been spreading fake news, making statements about Newry rail services and Narrow Water bridge. How can that work when your colleague the Finance Minister has not even brought forward a Budget? Are you not ashamed of making empty promises to the good people of Newry and Armagh, whom I am proud to represent, filling them full of hope about improved rail services and developments that may never happen? Are you not ashamed of yourself? You are putting out fake news.

Mr Hazzard: The only person who should be ashamed is the Member. The people of Newry will experience improved rail services as a result of me making these decisions. I am not sure whether the Member has been aware, or been awake, in recent weeks, but I will remain the Minister for Infrastructure over the next number of weeks. I have had conversations with Translink, and we have talked about the enhancements that are needed in Newry.

That is why they are now going to review the situation with services in Newry and enhance them where necessary.

That is the situation. This is not fake news. I do not get into the realm of fake news. As I said, the people who I have been talking to in Newry over the past few days are, obviously, different from the people who the Member for Newry and Armagh has been talking to over the last few days. Local people are excited by the fact that they are going to see improved rail services —

Mr McNulty: When?

Mr Hazzard: This year. I have also announced, as you have seen, a joint initiative between ourselves and Dublin about improving the service line. This is not fake news.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Sydney Anderson, I should inform Members that question 7 and question 13 have been withdrawn.

Winter Flooding

2. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for his assessment of the Strong report on the 'Review of Winter Flooding (Northern Ireland) 2015-2016'. (AQO 904/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The report was an evidence-based study, which sought to obtain facts from a wide range of stakeholders, covering farming, engineering, environment and governance. It is clearly well informed, wide-ranging and challenging, and I am very impressed by the extensive nature of the engagement carried out. I believe that the considerable time taken to listen to those impacted by last winter's floods was time well spent. The findings in the report are set out using the theme of resilience throughout, and it focuses on a number of sectors such as farmers, staff and land use. Importantly, the report highlights that flooding is not something that can be solved but is a reality that we must learn to live with and manage. My Department is currently preparing an action plan to allocate responsibility for progressing the recommendations in the report through the flood strategy steering group, as this includes representation from other Departments.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for that response. Minister, you will be well aware of the damage that was caused to land, property and businesses in upper Bann. I am referring to the area along the lough shore at Kinnego,

and at the Birches and Maghery areas of Portadown. In light of your answer, what assurances can you give to those people? Those people are living in fear at times that they will get this again. They can certainly not go through that. What assurances can you give that the recommendations of this report will be fully carried out and that any criteria will be looked at to ensure that rural dwellers are looked at in a manner to suit their needs? Each one is specific, and I do not know that compensation will help those rural dwellers.

Mr Hazzard: The Member is correct to talk about the resilience in the rural community, and Mr Strong points to this. There were five commendations in the report. The first was for distinct leadership by the then Agriculture and Rural Development Minister, Michelle O'Neill, and the chief executive of Rivers Agency, David Porter, during the period. The second was for the notable support and guidance from the Ulster Farmers' Union, and the third one was for the strong resilience shown by many in the rural community. This goes wider than just flooding. We know that in periods of very cold weather with ice and snowy conditions the rural community stands up. It had the vision to engage with natural flood management systems, and there were sustained efforts by emergency planning groups and community resilience and services. The one word that repeats itself throughout this is "resilience". I think that there is an acceptance among Governments that the situation is not one of eradicating flooding but that it is something that we have to manage. That is a position that we are coming to.

In dealing with flooding, how do we then go forward? The 10 high-level recommendations include increased research and development into our farming practices and flood plains; improvements to communications during flood events; collaboration to further develop the multi-agency approach; a focus on civil contingency and emergency planning; and connecting resources to make the best use of our collective skills. An action plan is being drawn up by officials from Rivers Agency, and, given that input from other Departments is required, this will then be taken forward by the flood strategy prevention group.

Mrs Dobson: Minister, I, like Mr Anderson, have met many of these homeowners, farmers and businesses in upper Bann that have been affected, and livelihoods have been put at risk. Many farmers have been there for generations, and they do fear that it is Groundhog Day. What can you do to reassure them that they

can have the confidence that this review will make any difference whatsoever?

Mr Hazzard: In my short time in post thus far, I, too, have been into the areas that have suffered badly, and there is a great sense of frustration. As I said to the previous Member, it struck me that there is a sense of acceptance that we are where we are and we need now to learn how we live with this and ensure that it does not ruin our lives every winter. I think that is the situation that we have got to. The other thing that strikes me is that the farming community is central to this and will be central to the flood strategy steering group and the recommendations going forward.

This is not a plan that will be foisted on communities; it is a plan that communities will play a central part in taking forward.

Ms Armstrong: As the Minister knows, I come from the constituency with the longest coastline in Northern Ireland. What assurances can he give that coastal management will be dealt with and that my community and constituency will not be ignored again when it comes to winter flooding caused by coastal erosion?

Mr Hazzard: I have been dealing with coastal erosion. On two or three occasions, I have had meetings with my colleague Michelle McIlveen, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and I have no doubt that the Departments will continue to work on it. I, too, come from a constituency, South Down, that has suffered from this in recent years in places such as Killough, Rostrevor and Warrenpoint. I know how important it is. Work is going on to develop the best way forward, first and most important to assess exactly where we stand. I know that Scotland has done work over the last number of years on assessing where exactly they stand with their coastline, and there is merit in us doing that here as well.

Transport Operator Licensing

3. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, what action he is taking to ensure passenger transport operator licensing for Northern Ireland transport companies that operate outside the United Kingdom will not be negatively impacted by a break from European Union regulation 1071/2009 and regulation 1073/2009. (AQO 905/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The issue of international passenger transport is being considered as part of a detailed assessment of the potential impact of a withdrawal from the EU. All of these considerations will feed into negotiations going forward. However, it is essential to make sure that British Government Ministers keep at the forefront of their thinking the unique set of circumstances that apply on the island of Ireland when it comes to passenger transport. There are many journeys across the border every day, with passengers travelling for work, education and leisure purposes. It is very important that people in the North and South continue to have a choice of transport services at their disposal and can enjoy free movement on this island when and where they wish.

That said, it is too early to make an informed assessment of any impact on the North's international passenger transport arising from a withdrawal from the EU. This will largely depend on the terms of the relationship that is eventually agreed with the EU. My officials are engaged with officials in the Department for Transport (DFT) EU exit coordination unit to ensure that they include in their thinking the specific issues that impact on the island of Ireland.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. You mentioned an informed assessment, but what plans do you have to change the current passenger transport operating legislation to align more with the Republic of Ireland and the rest of Europe — as you outlined, those transport links are very important — or are you minded to continue with the current UK derogations?

Mr Hazzard: It is fair to say that this is a fluid situation. Just today, the British Prime Minister has made a statement that will be deeply worrying to public and passenger transport providers on the island of Ireland. One thing that has come out of her statement today is that a hard border looks inevitable at the minute, and that will be deeply concerning. It is a very fluid situation, but, rest assured, it is one that my officials certainly have on their agenda to discuss with officials in Dublin and London.

Mr Speaker: Mr William Irwin is not in his place.

Rural Schools: Winter Service

5. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how his Department's winter service is implemented in relation to rural

schools in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. (AQO 907/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The processes and procedures operating in Fermanagh and South Tyrone are no different from anywhere else. Those processes were reviewed following a period of prolonged ice and snow in November and December 2008 that resulted in the closure of a number of rural schools. The disruption at the time prompted the then Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, to ask officials to carry out an examination of the operational response to areas around rural schools and, in particular, those that were regularly affected by adverse weather conditions. This exercise resulted in a revised winter service policy that provided priority secondary salting to schools with a history of closure due to inaccessibility associated solely with the presence of snow or ice on the adjacent network. It was recognised that it would not be possible to salt all roads to such schools. The secondary salting is, therefore, carried out on the shortest route from the school to a road on the salting schedule.

I should highlight that secondary salting occurs after the main salting schedule has been completed and when problems remain with ice and snow on untreated roads. It does not occur in response to normal frost conditions, when such roads are passable with care and would benefit little from the application of salt, as they would not experience the substantial traffic needed to disperse the salt solution across the carriageway.

2.15 pm

Mrs Barton: As you will be aware, the main entrance to a school is very often not on the main road, it is on another road that is not on the gritting route. Can you give consideration to such roads being salted and gritted?

Mr Hazzard: As I have just outlined, it is entirely unrealistic to expect the Department to be able to salt every single rural road in particular across the North. It simply would not be affordable or practical in any sense. So, we have to prioritise. As I said, when it comes to schools, the best solution here is to salt that route of the shortest distance.

I make two appeals here. Schools go above and beyond what is expected of them to ensure that their entrances and areas around the school are made safe, but the Government cannot be around every corner with salt in a bucket. We need to make sure that drivers take that extra bit of care. We have been fairly

fortunate so far this winter that the winter has been mild, but we are talking about millions of pounds invested in salting our network, and we do that. You would be talking about hundreds of millions of pounds if we were to expand it out to every single rural road, and I am sure that nobody in the Chamber would be calling for that.

Mr McPhillips: On access to schools, especially on roads in south Fermanagh that are prone to flooding, can the Minister provide an update on the works promised over a year ago to be undertaken on the Wattlebridge Road, Newtownbutler, Derrylin Road, Smith's Strand, Lisnaskea and Inishmore Road, Lisbellaw?

Mr Hazzard: As this question relates to salting and not to the issue that the Member has raised, I would be more than happy to correspond with him if he wants to write to me. I am sure that he is able to get onto a website and see the Department's address.

A1/M1: Congestion

Mr Lunn: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ceist uimhir a sé. That is question number 6, Minister.

6. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on his plans to relieve congestion at the A1/M1 junction at Sprucefield. (AQO 908/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat. I refer you to my previous answer on this issue that was issued to you on 19 September. At this time, the situation remains unchanged. My Department is aware of congestion suffered by commuters using the A1/M1 junction and has a long-term proposal to provide a new road link between the A1 and M1 motorway bypassing Sprucefield.

The proposed scheme, which falls within Transport NI's strategic road improvement programme, will benefit strategic traffic by avoiding delays in the Sprucefield area. The proposed scheme was taken to a preliminary stage of development, which identified two possible route options, but further options will need to be examined. The Executive are currently focused on delivering their capital flagship projects and there is insufficient funding to continue with the development of this scheme. Further development of the scheme will be dependent on the availability of finance through future budgetary statements.

On a more general note, my Department is progressing the development of new transport plans, in line with the new approach to regional transportation. This will set out a long-term programme of investment. Development of these plans will provide an opportunity for all strategic roads across the North, including the upgrade to the M1/A1 link, to be considered for future funding.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his answer. I must say that I do not recall asking an identical question in September but, fair enough, it is the same issue. Will he update us on the associated work that may have to go ahead, known as the Knockmore link, which would obviously have a bearing on the overall strategic plan?

Mr Hazzard: In the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan 2015, the Knockmore to Sprucefield link road, known as the M1 Knockmore link, has been identified as a developer-led proposal. This means that it is the responsibility of the developers of adjacent land to deliver the road scheme as part of their development. I understand that Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council is currently considering how the scheme could help to unlock development potential in the west Lisburn area.

The council is aware that the limited capital funding available to my Department is directed towards the maintenance and improvement of the strategic road network and it is highly unlikely that any financial contribution that can be made towards the scheme can be justified at this time. Currently, when compared to the demand for other major road schemes, it is not a priority. It is an issue on which I have had discussions with local representatives. I understand its importance to the local area but, as I have laid out, I believe that there is scope for progress on that, and that scope will be in relation to developers and the local council.

Mr Butler: On the subject of the north feeder road: at any stage, was there a commitment from the Department to part fund that road? Is this a change in tactical direction from the Minister?

Mr Hazzard: I am not aware of any commitment. Certainly, it is not something that I have addressed since coming into post. So, as far as I am aware, it is not a change of direction. I certainly have not given any instruction to change direction. Succinctly; I am not aware of any previous direction on that.

A26 Junctions

8. **Mr Logan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on plans for junctions at the A26 Lisnevenagh Road, Woodgreen Road and Cromkill Road. (AQO 910/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I am happy to confirm that collision remedial work at the Cromkill Road/Lisnevenagh Road junction is programmed to commence within the next few weeks. This work to prohibit the right turn from Cromkill Road towards Antrim will directly address the primary causation factors of recent collisions, where traffic turning right out of Cromkill Road has been struck by northbound vehicles on the Lisnevenagh Road.

There are two viable alternative routes for traffic wishing to travel south on the A26 from the Cromkill Road and Galgorm Road area of the town. Both routes use the Seven Towers roundabout and both are considered a reasonable and safer alternative to crossing the busy northbound carriageway of the A26.

Mr Logan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that, on 6 January this year, on that stretch of road alone, six accidents occurred, will the Minister consider reviewing the safety of that road itself?

Mr Hazzard: I will indeed. That piece of work has been carried out in the past. That particular stretch of road has been a focus for the Department. The recent safety report also recommends a number of low-cost, site-specific measures to be implemented in the short term. These include the provision and review of street lighting at Woodgreen Road and Barnish Road, a review of signs and lines along the entire route to ensure clarity and consistency, as well as the legislative change to ban the right turn at Woodgreen Road and Cromkill Road as I have detailed.

Mr Allister: The record of these various junctions on the Lisnevenagh Road has been horrendous. Why has the original plan to attend to the junction at Maine Road been abandoned? Its having been a junction identified as in need of remedial works, it seems rather odd that the remedial works or any plan for them have been abandoned.

Mr Hazzard: I am not aware of any plan for remedial works being abandoned. Again, it is certainly not a decision that I have taken or am aware of. As I outlined in my answer to the previous question from Mr Logan, there are a

number of low-cost, site-specific recommendations that I think will take place over the short to medium term and that will help to provide greater safety to commuters on that stretch of road in future.

Mr Speaker: Mr Adrian McQuillan is not in his place. Mrs Sandra Overend is not in her place. I call Mr Keith Buchanan.

Parking Regulations

11. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline proposals for safer parking regulations using street markings and the deployment of traffic attendants in towns across Northern Ireland, including Coalisland. (AQO 913/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: My Department has the ability to regulate and control traffic using powers provided in the Road Traffic Regulation Order 1997. These powers include being able to both prohibit and restrict parking as well as providing parking places. We generally employ parking prohibitions or restrictions to resolve traffic progression and road safety issues in order to keep traffic moving safely and efficiently. A decision to provide any measure, whether it is intended to prohibit or restrict parking or indeed provide parking, will be based on local circumstances. Provision may also be part of an overall transport plan for an area.

Parking prohibitions and restrictions and parking provision are generally indicated on the road using traffic signs and road markings, which are prescribed under the Traffic Signs Regulations 1997 or otherwise authorised by my Department. As well as providing essential road-user information, traffic signs help to ensure that road space is used in the way in which it was intended to be used by facilitating enforcement by traffic attendants.

In the case of Coalisland, there are relatively few parking restrictions when compared with other towns. In the past, there have been numerous attempts to introduce parking restrictions. However, these were opposed by local people, local shop frontagers and public representatives. Mid Ulster Council is currently planning the delivery of a public realm scheme in Coalisland. During the development of the scheme, the provision of parking and the need for any restriction on parking will be reviewed.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Coalisland seems to have a lack of redcoats and to be the only town that I am aware of in my constituency and certainly

across other areas in my colleagues' constituencies where the term "redcoat" does not exist. Can the Minister confirm to me whether there is a fear of redcoats in that town for whatever reason?

Mr Hazzard: I am glad that the Member has done a survey of all the towns in his district to detect the number of redcoats and when they are operating. There are a number of reasons why this may be the situation. The Department's parking enforcement contractor deploys traffic attendants to any town or city that has parking restrictions. To maximise effectiveness and efficiency under the enforcement contract, traffic attendants are deployed to those places where they will have the most impact on road safety and/or traffic progression.

Coalisland has relatively few parking restrictions compared with other towns. My Department's parking enforcement unit carried out a short trial of enforcement in Coalisland on three occasions in 2016. That resulted in two warning notices being issued over the three visits.

Traffic Congestion: Carryduff

12. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline any departmental plans to alleviate traffic congestion in Carryduff. (AQO 914/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I can advise that my Department aims to minimise congestion on the highway network as far as is practicable. The A24 Saintfield Road corridor that extends into Carryduff carries some 30,000 vehicles a day, and some level of congestion during peak travel times is inevitable. Carryduff itself is restricted by the existence and operation of three major junctions in relatively close proximity: the A24 Ballynahinch Road/Church Road/Hillsborough Road staggered signalised junction; the A7 Saintfield Road/Church Road/Comber Road staggered signalised junction; and the Carryduff roundabout.

In general, the operation of the traffic signals on the Saintfield Road corridor, and indeed all arterial routes into Belfast, are monitored by staff at the Transport NI traffic information and control centre using its CCTV network. This allows for optimum control strategies and signal timings to be used along the route to ensure minimum delay to all road users. If you have a specific junction or location in mind, my departmental officials would be more than happy to look it.

Mr Stalford: Are there any plans to expand the park-and-ride schemes in the area around Carryduff? Folks living in the centre of the town find it very frustrating that, on weekdays, congestion, especially from the direction of the Minister's constituency into Belfast, causes problems for people living in the town.

Mr Hazzard: I am delighted that people are seeking enhanced park-and-ride services. The Cairnshill park-and-ride facility, which is probably the most relevant one, has been a huge success. It takes hundreds of vehicles off the Saintfield Road every day, perhaps saving us close to 2 kilometres of congestion every single day.

I have seen plans for a second wave of park-and-ride facilities right across the North. Those will start to roll out in future months. They include Clough and Downpatrick in my constituency, which will alleviate some of the traffic you mentioned coming in.

The message for people in Carryduff is that they are on the main bus routes, and my greenway plan, which I outlined recently, and the Belfast bicycle network plan, which will be rolled out very shortly, includes a greenway from Carryduff to the city centre, which will allow people to cycle in and get off the road. The message to people in Carryduff is to make a decision to get off the road and get onto public transport. A couple of fairly large housing developments will be coming into the Carryduff area. As I said in my original answer, if you have a specific junction in mind, my officials will be more than happy to liaise with you.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister update the House on the Belfast cycle network plan and tell us whether it will help to ease congestion in the area?

Mr Hazzard: I hope that it will. As Belfast continues to grow into areas such as Carryduff and the Four Winds, you see the demand, so it is a prime contender to do that. I travel that road regularly and see the number of people using the buses, cycling and walking. As I said in my original answer, my greenway plan and vision for the future and the Belfast cycle network plan will include increased facilities to meet the demand for cycling in that part of the world. I hope that the Member will not have to wait much longer to set eyes on the plan.

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

2.30 pm

Executive Flagship Projects

T1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to assure the House and, more importantly, the people dependent on the Executive's flagship projects, not least in the construction industry, that there is a commitment and a definite surety that those key projects, including the A5, the A6, Belfast rapid transit and the Belfast transport hub, will proceed in the event of the institutions having collapsed. (AQT 656/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: Absolutely, and I am glad that the Member has taken the time to raise the issue. As he outlined, flagship projects are Executive priorities. I have had discussions with my colleague the Minister of Finance and with the Finance Department and it is very clear that the funding remains in place. These are priorities, and I, as Minister, have left clear instructions about my ministerial priorities on a number of issues, including flagship Executive priority projects, such as the A5, the A6, the Belfast transport hub and, of course, Belfast rapid transit, which is due to come live next year.

Mr McGlone: I understand that those will be your priorities until such times as you are no longer Minister, but can you give an assurance that they will stick in place, post your time there? Will the commitment of £75 million from the Irish Government to phase 1 of the A5 remain secure? What discussions have you had with the Irish Government on that?

Mr Hazzard: The first point to make is that the £75 million is not enough, and I have had discussions with the Southern Government on the issue. I have met Shane Ross, and we have discussed the need to go back to the £400 million figure originally mentioned; that is the figure that we need to see on the table to move forward a lot of this. However, the Member should rest assured that flagship Executive priority projects will move forward in the years ahead.

Road Repairs

T2. **Mr McKee** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what progress has been made on the 1,000 resurfacing and repair jobs within Northern Ireland that he prioritised early in his time as Minister and to state whether the jobs are on target or have been completed. (AQT 657/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: We are well on target. I believe that nearly two thirds of the road repairs have been completed. We would probably have done a lot more, but, in some areas, NI Water and some utility contractors were due to lay mains. Instead of doing the resurfacing and then having it dug up, we decided to hold back in a number of places so that the utility work can take place and afterwards we will do the resurfacing. It has been a huge success. Everywhere you go and talk to people in rural communities, the state of rural roads has certainly been a big issue. It was a big issue in the last election, and in the coming election people will obviously raise the issue of the state of the roads. However, I would like to think that, this year, the angst on the doorsteps might not be just as high as it was last time.

Mr McKee: Thank you, Minister, for your answer thus far. We have hardly had a chance to get holes in the roads since the last election. The reason I ask the question is that I wrote to you in your first week in office about two roads — Carrigenagh Road and Mill Road in Kilkeel — that were in a very bad state of repair. Are they on target? Have they yet to be done?

Mr Hazzard: I do not recall the answer that I provided to you at that time, but I make a commitment to look at that and to come back to you on the situation as regards those two roads.

Residents' Parking: South Belfast

T3. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in the light of the speed with which we are moving towards the collapse of devolution, to give South Belfast constituents an assurance that, if the recently announced residents' parking pilot scheme, which will be welcomed by those constituents who have had their lives made miserable in the Holylands area, is successful, it will be expanded whether a Minister remains in place or not. (AQT 658/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: We have to take cognisance of the fact that people are asking this type of question. It is not just me, the political head of my Department; officials are also keen for such schemes to go ahead. As we progress a number of the schemes, I have confidence that they will roll out.

There is no doubt that, even since these stories hit the headlines, there is a big demand for residents' parking schemes across the board. That is something that we are going to have to deal with in the months ahead. Certainly, I

hope that I am in a position to be able to do that, but, as I said, if the Member's party had taken different actions ahead of Christmas, I could have provided a bit more clarity than I am able to provide today. The message is clear to those constituents that this is a priority for my Department. The value and justification for residents' parking schemes are not things that rest with just the head of the Department but with my officials also.

Mr Stalford: I admire the Minister for Infrastructure's chutzpah. If you slam a Mercedes into a wall, do not blame the passengers for the state that it is in. It is important that people have confidence that these schemes are going to be expanded. In that vein, can the Minister tell us when the report will be brought back to the Department on the success, or otherwise, of the pilot scheme?

Mr Hazzard: I think I am due to receive that report in and around the summer. That is the situation. Let us make no bones about it; this situation would be a hell of a lot different if the Member's party had taken a different course of action prior to and after Christmas. This is no chutzpah.

DFI Equality Unit: PFG Email

T4. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he approved the action referred to in an email from his Department's infrastructural equality unit on 6 January, which advised that it had screened out, on section 75 grounds, some aspects of the Programme for Government, particularly government indicators 23 and 25. (AQT 659/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I am not aware of the email that you are referring to. If you want to correspond with me on this over the next few days, I will be more than happy for you to do so.

Mr Beggs: Under the Programme for Government indicators 23 and 25, and what we propose to do, is listed an upgrade of the Buncrana Road, Narrow Water Bridge and Newry southern relief road, and rail extensions to Dungannon and Castledawson. Why is there no mention of, say, the Larne line or extensions to our airports or the Crumlin line? Do you think this would stand up to a full equality impact assessment?

Mr Hazzard: In short, yes.

Maine Road/Lisnevenagh Road Junction

T5. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in the light of his earlier answer, when he said that the idea that the safety improvement schemes at the Maine Road/Lisnevenagh Road junction had been abandoned was untrue, why then, in reply to AQW 8474/16-21 just four weeks ago on 20 December, did he say that the proposed restriction at Maine Road "has been dropped". (AQT 660/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The Member will want to look at Hansard to clarify that. I did not say that it was untrue; I said that I was not aware of it. The Member has had correspondence from my Department — from me — that this has been the case. I also went on to say that there are a number of on-site, low-cost remedial actions that will improve the safety of that. It is not a case of misleading the Member, as he wishes to allude to.

Mr Allister: In terms of things that the Minister seems to have forgotten about, will he give us an update on the long-awaited park-and-ride scheme at Cullybackey, particularly now when he tells us that there is going to be an hourly service through Cullybackey to Londonderry?

Mr Hazzard: I am more than happy. We have a number of park-and-ride facilities across the North that are looking for enhancements. I have met some of my colleagues from across the way about Cullybackey and some of the upgrades to the train line and the situation we are in. I am very pleased to say that we will see serious enhancements to the park-and-ride in Cullybackey. Those will happen in the months ahead.

York Street Interchange: Update

T6. **Mr Logan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the York Street interchange. (AQT 661/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The York Street interchange certainly remains one of my departmental road priorities. I recently published my decision to accept the independent inspector's report. My Department will now begin to engage with the community around a number of the issues that were identified in that report.

Mr Logan: I thank the Minister for the answer. I am sure the Minister will appreciate that it is important for not only those residents but those

who commute up and down to Belfast, and for tourism. Will the Minister outline a time schedule for work progressing on that?

Mr Hazzard: There are a number of issues that probably make it difficult to outline a very accurate timescale for moving forward with the York Street interchange, not least the fact that the funding difficulties that we faced have, I suggest, been exacerbated by the Prime Minister's statement today on Brexit. It is very clear that we, out of any of the states, are heading for a very hard Brexit.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Hazzard: Members can say "Hear, hear" till the cows come home, but when farmers lose out on various grants for various things, the cows will be coming home to an empty shed. At the end of the day, we were able to facilitate —

Mr Allister: With boilers in it.

Mr Hazzard: Aye, it will probably be a warm enough shed, right enough.

At the end of the day, Europe has been good to the people of the North regarding infrastructure projects, and the interchange is one such project that has suffered at the hands of the Brexiteers who cheer on the other side of the House. That is the situation that we find ourselves in today.

Mr Speaker: Mr Edwin Poots is not in his place.

Concessionary Fares Scheme

T8. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he has considered, under the concessionary fares scheme, introducing free transport for people who are partially sighted and their aides. (AQT 663/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I have had various conversations with Translink officials over the past number of months and up to this point about our fare structures and what we can do to enhance passenger numbers. Translink has taken a number of exciting and innovative decisions in the run-up to Christmas to attract people on to public transport. That has been hugely successful. The number of people using our Metro services has gone through the roof, and the number of people who, most importantly, use the Ulsterbus rural service has gone up as well. There is an onus on Translink now — I

am certainly more than happy to work with it over the next number of weeks — to develop a system that gets as many people on to our public transport as possible. Fares will be very much part of that.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his response. I make the point that the cost of introducing such a measure is not very high and that the scheme exists in parts of England and Scotland. I do not know what the state of play will be in the next few months or whether the outgoing Minister will be a Minister in a future Executive, but if he is, I ask him to consider seriously introducing the scheme.

Mr Hazzard: I am more than happy to look at schemes that get numbers on to our buses. If we extend such a project, it will cost a lot more money. Those are the sorts of implications that roll out of either Tory austerity or, as I said, the effects of a hard-line Brexit — I am aware that the Member and his party campaigned for Brexit — and budgets are being hit. There are therefore consequences to some of these decisions. My focus and that of my Department is on getting more people on to public transport and making our public transport system more sustainable. As I said, I am more than happy to look at any way of doing that.

School Bus Fares

T9. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to confirm that the Education Authority would require permission from the Department for Infrastructure's Driver and Vehicle Agency to change the operating licence of yellow school buses in order to introduce bus fares for pupils and to state whether he would oppose the introduction of such unfair charges. (AQT 664/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: That may well be the situation, but I will have to clarify the issue of responsibility with officials. I think that there is an avenue for looking at school transport, and we as a party have looked at it. We spend far too much money on school transport — there are no two ways about it. We know that that is the case for a number of reasons, and we have to look at it. I sympathise with the Minister of Education and the Education Authority, which have to deal with being in that position with their budgets. There is no doubt that there is a way out of this. I have talked to Translink officials in recent weeks about delivering transport services such as home-to-school transport in a more efficient manner, and there are ways in which to do that.

Mr Speaker: A quick supplementary, Mr Lyttle.

Mr Lyttle: Perhaps the Minister will clarify whether or not he supports free school travel for our pupils.

Mr Hazzard: I absolutely support the idea that, where it is practical and sensible, we need to transport our kids in a safe situation. What I do not agree with is some of the education policies set down on school transport that mean that some people cannot get a bus two or three miles down the road but others can be bused halfway across the world to go to a particular set of schools. At times, I got six buses a day to go to school, and I do not think that that is right. When it comes to school transport, we need to find a more sustainable way of going forward.

But again, without straying into Education matters, we need to find a more sustainable way to finance schools, never mind school transport.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister for Infrastructure.

Justice

Mr Speaker: I have to inform the House that questions 3 and 6 have been withdrawn.

HMP Maghaberry: Safety

1. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the safety of prisoners and staff at HMP Maghaberry. (AQO 918/16-21)

Ms Sugden (The Minister of Justice): The Prison Service continues to maintain a clear focus on the safety of staff and takes the duty of care for all the individuals it holds in custody extremely seriously. Following a recent recruitment campaign, 37 custody prison officers commenced employment at Maghaberry prison in November 2016. They have been deployed to front-line services and are supported by the senior management team, residential managers and experienced residential staff. The rotation of staff working in the more stressful areas is ongoing, and that ensures that staff are rotated from these areas regularly. An individual professional development peer mentoring programme has been in place from 27 June 2016.

The new core day which has been introduced delivers a consistent, predictable and effective regime for prisoners and staff. The number of

lockdowns has reduced, and those that occur are more regulated and predictable. This lessens the tensions that can occur when prisoners are informed of a last-minute change to their regime. The Northern Ireland Prison Service continues to work reactively with its partner agencies to prevent illicit substances and contraband entering the establishment and to reduce the risk posed to staff and prisoners in relation to the misuse of prescription reduction.

Other measures that have been put in place for the safety of staff and prisoners include the visible patrolling of all integrated prisoner recreation areas by staff and the deployment of body-worn cameras throughout the prison. Body-worn cameras have been seen to reduce the amount and level of verbal abuse and challenges from prisoners. The captured footage may be used in the internal prison disciplinary process, and, in some instances, it has been used to support complaints made to the PSNI. The safety of staff, prisoners and visitors remains under constant review.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am sure that she is aware of the high percentage of prisoners — I think it is something like 75% — who have mental health problems and the stress on prison officers. What is the Department of Health doing to review mental health in Maghaberry prison?

Ms Sugden: Mental health issues in prisons did not begin or end with my tenure as Justice Minister, although I started the conversation on how we effectively address mental health issues in prisons. Had I been in post longer it is something that I would have been keen to see out in the next five years, but here lies the problem. I will remain as Minister until the election, and I am quite keen to ensure that we maintain that contact with the Department of Health because this does not just fall within my remit. Mental health in prisons is a very significant issue, and the recent deaths in custody have shown us how significant it is. It is something that I had committed to taking forward, but I will ensure that my Department continues that work. I hope that, if anyone succeeds me, they can look at that again because it is of utmost importance.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I know that she is justly concerned about the safety of prisoners and prison officers. Of the 77 prison officers who have been assaulted in the last 12 months — that is more than one a week — how many have had

to take a protracted period off work or have not returned to full duty?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question and for his interest in this area. I am deeply concerned about the number of prison officers who have been assaulted in prisons in the last year. I do not have specific figures to hand on those who have taken time off, but there is significant sickness absence. The assaults on prison officers that have happened would suggest why we have such a high level of sickness absence.

I have asked my officials to look at rolling out body-worn cameras across the Prison Service and not just in the areas that are deemed to be most at risk. It has been demonstrated that, where they are used, there is a reluctance to carry out those types of attacks on prison officers. It is something that I am keen to keep under review, and I am mindful of it. We also need to look at how we treat the Prison Service within the Northern Ireland Civil Service when it comes to disciplinary procedures. That is also something that I am quite concerned about.

I have a limited number of weeks left, Mr Beattie, but I will do what I can in the meantime. Be assured that it has always been my commitment to look after our prison officers just as much as prisoners, because that is where it begins.

Ms Mallon: Given the Minister's commitment to involve people from the community on the panel looking at suicide and self-harm in prisons, can she advise which persons and organisations she has appointed?

Ms Sugden: Not at this stage. I do not have that detail to hand. The review that the Health Minister and I announced shortly before Christmas, on how we can best tackle mental health in prisons, is ongoing. The Member is entirely right that I have made that commitment to the House time and again.

We have to involve the community because it is not just about what happens when prisoners are in custody and in my care; it is about what happens before they come into and after they leave custody. Otherwise, there could be an endless cycle. We need to break that cycle, which does not begin and end with the support that we put in place whilst they are in custody. That support has to be followed through once they are released into the community. The Probation Board is under the new leadership of Cheryl Lamont, and she has expressed similar ideas. Probation has a practical purpose in

ensuring that people will not reoffend and find themselves back in custody. That work, to which I have been committed, is ongoing, and I hope that, as I move out of office, that commitment has been instilled in my Department.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Justice Minister provide an update on the work of her Department to progress a bespoke health and well-being policy and provisions for prison officers, particularly at HMP Maghaberry, given the security risk to which they can be exposed when receiving treatment on the health service?

Ms Sugden: Yes indeed. One of the good news stories for prisons was my decision to extend the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust (PRRT) to prison officers. That initiative is fantastic, and, if any Members ever get the opportunity to visit the PRRT to see the work that it does, I encourage them to do so. From a physical and mental perspective, its support is invaluable. The police have certainly got great value from it.

The Member has demonstrated to me a lot of commitment to looking after the needs of prison officers. There is a continued threat against prison officers, I regret to say, and the job is not easy. When all other public services have failed, people end up in custody, and it is prison officers on the front line who deal with that, so there needs to be that support.

My Department is finalising details on the extension to the PRRT. I am committed to doing this and hope to have an announcement before leaving office in the coming weeks.

Drug Addicts: Custody Suites

2. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Justice to outline what discussions she has had with the PSNI regarding the policies and procedures in place in custody suites to ensure the health needs of drug addicts are met, specifically in relation to overdosing and under-dosing. (AQO 919/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I have regular discussions with the Chief Constable on a range of strategic issues. However, the issue raised here — policies and procedures in custody suites — is an operational matter and has not, therefore, been discussed with the Chief Constable. The Member may wish to contact the PSNI directly.

A programme of rationalisation and upgrading of custody provision is under way across Northern Ireland, the goal being fewer, better-

equipped suites with embedded support services, including healthcare. However, I have received a number of representations in relation to suite closures and processing delays, and I have undertaken to raise these matters with the Chief Constable. Future healthcare provision in custody will be informed by the findings of the custody health needs assessment that was undertaken recently by the PSNI in collaboration with the Public Health Agency.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your response. I was concerned when you mentioned processing delays, given that an awful lot of people who come into custody suites are suffering from mental health problems. Is there any instruction that you can give to the PSNI on how better to deal with mental health issues while people are being processed?

Ms Sugden: The Member raises a valid point. It emerged from my conversations with the Chief Constable that there is a need to understand the role of the Police Service in Northern Ireland better and to look at it in the context of 2017.

I understand the issues that the police face daily, and mental health is one. I do not think that any MLA would be surprised to learn that, at the weekend, police often spend a lot of time in A&Es, sitting with people who have mental health issues. That takes up two or three hours and ties up resources that they could be devoting elsewhere.

There needs to be a realistic conversation about the role of the Police Service of Northern Ireland in the wider context of public services, including social services and healthcare services. Again, not to sound too despondent, this was all work in progress. I hope that this work can continue under whoever may take the mantle, if it is not me.

Drug Misuse: South Belfast

4. **Ms Hanna** asked the Minister of Justice what she is doing to address drug misuse in South Belfast. (AQO 921/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I acknowledge that the misuse of drugs can, and does, impact on individuals and the wider community, not least in the Member's constituency as reflected in recent media reports. Yesterday's debate on alcohol-related crime also highlighted the challenges that substance misuse creates in society and the work that my Department and partners are carrying out to reduce the harm caused.

Operations to tackle drug misuse are led by the PSNI through the delivery of the policing plan. The PSNI regularly runs high profile operations targeted at street-level drug dealing. Dealing effectively with drug-related offences remains a policing priority for the PSNI in South Belfast.

At strategic level, responding to the range of potential harms caused by substance misuse is a key focus of the Executive's New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs. It is Northern Ireland's framework for reducing substance-related harm. Whilst the Department of Health leads on delivery, my Department has been and will remain a key contributor to that work. In addition, a task force meets to share information and intelligence on drug activity across Northern Ireland. At constituency level, the local policing and community safety partnership works to raise awareness of the associated impacts of such misuse, including through wider initiatives such as the Drug Dealers Don't Care — Do You? campaign that was supported by Crimestoppers. PCSPs work very closely with the Public Health Agency to address drug misuse on an ongoing basis and will continue to concentrate their efforts on tackling the issues identified in the local community.

Ms Hanna: I thank the Minister for her answer. Some Members might be aware of a persistent supply of drugs problem in the Lagan Meadows area in Stranmillis, which it is understood might have been displaced from another park. This is a well-used beauty spot, but drug-related paraphernalia and the appearance of crime are putting people off. Young people have been gathering there for a different purpose in recent months, and this presents a real danger to them. Are you satisfied with the conviction rate of those involved with the supply of drugs?

Ms Sugden: I do not think that we can ever be satisfied with the conviction rate of those who supply drugs. Throughout society, drug dealing and drug taking is a can of worms that it would be very difficult to put the lid on. That is not to say that we should not be doing anything about it. Indeed, I have every confidence that the PSNI is tackling it to the best of its abilities. Again, while I am loath to say it at this stage, this requires a cross-departmental approach. This is not just an issue for Justice. It is an issue for Health, it is an issue for Education, it is an issue that permeates all sections of our society.

I remember, when times were better, having conversations with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister about how, if we, as an Executive, were to tackle one issue, we need to

tackle drug dealing on our streets because it creates bigger problems in society that are affecting us. I think even of the work that we were doing around tackling paramilitarism and criminality. Drugs are a big problem there. What really frustrates me is the path that they are leading our young people down. If young people are choosing to take that path, it obviously means that they feel that other paths are not available to them. Other Departments need to play a role in giving them the future that they deserve.

Mr Allen: I place on record my praise for the PSNI for its sterling efforts to remove drugs and those who are dealing them from our streets. What engagements has the Minister had with the PSNI to ensure that all available resources are in the police's hands to continue to remove drugs and bring these criminals before our courts?

Ms Sugden: I reiterate Mr Allen's comments about the PSNI. Having had the experience of being Justice Minister for the past eight months, I want to pay tribute to the PSNI because it works very extensively on the front line to keep our communities safe. I do all that I can to ensure that the police have a sufficient budget, but I do so in the context of my departmental budget. The police receive a significant amount of my departmental budget, which constrains other parts of the justice system.

As I mentioned, a holistic look needs to be taken at the justice system. That begins with the PSNI making the arrests and finding the evidence but also goes right through to the courts system. I think that we need to be realistic about that. Operationally, the police deal with their own budget, and I have regular conversations with the Chief Constable to facilitate how I can help in that. It is not just about giving the police money. It is about ensuring that the police are freed up in other ways so that they can do the job. Perhaps those resources could go to those areas. It has to be a holistic approach if we are realistic about tackling the justice system, which the police are a huge part of.

3.00 pm

Mr Stalford: Before I ask my question, I thank the Justice Minister for the job that she has done over the last eight months. It has been quite a lonely place down there on your own without a party behind you, and you have acquitted yourself very well in the job. You will probably not want that to appear on a leaflet

somewhere. It would probably cost you votes, but anyway.

Will the Minister agree with me that it is important that society sends out a message that drug dealing will not be tolerated and that, if we are exercising these powers again after the election, we should look at the introduction of minimum sentencing for those who are selling drugs, especially to teenagers?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his comments. If that is an invitation to join your party, no, I will be standing as an independent in the next Assembly election. I think that standing for any party would do me no good at this stage, but anyway.

Yes, as part of my sentencing review, we will certainly look at all the different areas in and around drugs. There has to be a zero-tolerance approach towards people who are selling drugs, because, as anyone who followed my campaign around tackling paramilitarism will have seen, it really does begin at a level where some people perhaps do not realise. Even buying counterfeit goods is creating a chain of events that could lead to drug dealing on our streets, and your children could be buying those drugs. That message needs to get home. It is not just about the Government trying to ensure their taxes so that they keep these institutions up. We need to have a real conversation about everybody's role in terms of drug dealing in Northern Ireland, but it definitely has to be a priority. When we move aside the political problems that this country has, we should be talking about the issues that really could change lives. For me, drugs is a really important issue. Further to any sort of election, I encourage all Members to put that at the forefront of their mind, because the scourge of that on our streets is really quite damaging.

Ms Bailey: Does the Minister have any evidence of a spike, or certainly an increase, in drug-related crimes, particularly in the south Belfast area over the past lot of years?

Ms Sugden: I have none at hand, but I can certainly do that work for the Member. Drugs and alcohol, as was alluded to in the debate yesterday, are a big indicator of why people commit crime. Drugs in itself even fuels the drug taking. It is a vicious cycle. As I said, it is a big problem in society that permeates through all different areas, and we need to focus on it.

Bail Conditions

5. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Justice to outline any plans she has to review how bail conditions are monitored. (AQO 922/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I would like to begin by expressing my heartfelt sympathy to the family of David Black. No one should have to endure what they have endured. Indeed, I had a conversation with the family over the past week about events that have been reported in the media.

The monitoring of bail conditions is a matter for the police, and, while the PSNI falls under the remit of my Department, it has complete operational autonomy. Consequently, it would be inappropriate for me to interfere with that, and, therefore, I cannot involve myself in individual cases or operational cases. I understand that the PSNI has issued an unequivocal apology to the Black family and has commissioned a review of its processes. I agree with its view that all sections of the criminal justice system should take the opportunity to reflect on this, because there is a failure there.

My Department is currently reviewing bail in line with the recommendation in the Fresh Start panel report on disbanding paramilitary groups. The review is focusing on bail decisions in those more serious cases assessed as being linked to organised crime or terrorist activity. An initial phase will bring together law enforcement agencies, the Public Prosecution Service, officials from the Office of the Lord Chief Justice and my Department to establish and consider the facts around bail decisions. A workshop is scheduled next month and the initial phase of the review is expected to be concluded by March. Should the findings from this initial phase highlight any issues, such as procedural or systemic matters, a second phase will be initiated to consider whether further measures are needed.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for her answer, but I think that the police's response is too little too late for the Black family.

Another opportunity was missed when the same individual was allowed to participate in a dissident rally last Easter. I do not believe that an apology is sufficient for the Black family. I believe that, if bail had been reviewed, there was an opportunity to put this man back in custody where he belonged until he had served the time that he properly deserves. Will the Minister give an assurance, given the catalogue of errors by the police, that she will look again

at what can be done? It is a highly embarrassing and reprehensible act that this man may have been involved in, and apologising to the family of Mr Black is not enough. I ask the Minister to review her decision.

Ms Sugden: The operational decision does not rest with me; ultimately, bail decisions rest with the courts and the PSNI. That said, I am appalled by what has happened. I am not scared to say that, even though I am stepping outside my jurisdiction in the matter. I made my feelings clear to the Chief Constable when this was allowed to happen. I can assure the Member that I have a focus on the issue to ensure that it will not happen again. The bail review has been ongoing in my Department since October. In light of this — I say that reluctantly, because it should not be in light of this; it should not have happened — I have asked my officials to expedite the review in any way that they can to give some comfort to the Black family. The Black family have gone through enough, and this will continue to raise those issues with them. It is devastating, and we need to do all that we can in the public services to ensure that victims are genuinely put first.

Mr Beggs: The Minister mentioned that the issue had been dealt with by her Department since October and that the initial phase for consultation would be the next few weeks. Following the May 2016 'Fresh Start panel report on the disbandment of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland', there was to be a review of bail conditions for those charged with serious offences in Northern Ireland. There is a very clear perception or belief that it is easier to achieve bail in Northern Ireland when one is charged with a serious offence. Why has it taken so long to come to a conclusion or even to have an initial phase? In the interim period, this event has happened.

Ms Sugden: I reiterate what I said in my answer to Mr Clarke: the bail review, as part of the three-person panel report, has been under way since October, a mere few months after that action plan was published. I am not sure what point the Member is trying to get at. My Department is committed to bringing this forward. Let us expedite it, because it has been demonstrated that we need to do that. For the record, of all the actions in the three-person panel report, those that have been fulfilled came from my Department. From my perspective, there is no lack of commitment to work towards that end.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister agree that it is a shocking indictment of our criminal justice system when someone charged with aiding and abetting one of the most horrendous murders of recent years is treated with kid gloves by the system, whereby the courts, through serial relaxations of his bail, removed the tagging restraint, reduced the number of days that he had to sign and allowed him out to attend hotel spa weekends? Then — surprise, surprise — he skips bail and the police do not discover it for over a month. Could there be a more shocking indictment? Have any real lessons been learned both by the judiciary, who are not above reproof in the matter, and by the police?

Ms Sugden: Again, I am appalled by the case. If lessons have not been learned, they certainly should have been. That is all I can say other than to reiterate what I have already said.

Mr Lyttle: It is clear that the hurt and distress to which the Black family have been exposed as a result of this failing is completely unacceptable. Will the Minister reiterate the timescale for the PSNI review of the bail checks system to ensure that it is adequately robust to avoid any reoccurrence of this nature?

Ms Sugden: We hope to have my review concluded by March. As I said, I hope to expedite that as soon as possible. I am not definitive about the PSNI's timescales on this, but I know that it is something that it has been reviewing since this mistake.

Legal Aid

7. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the reform of legal aid. (AQO 924/16-21)

Ms Sugden: A significant number of reforms to legal aid have already been delivered, including revised remuneration arrangements in criminal courts, with reduced fees, and reductions in the number of cases where it is appropriate to certify two counsel in the Crown Court. Measures have also been put in place to ensure that the appropriate level of representation is granted in civil courts. The reforms have helped to bring the cost of legal aid under control from a high of £106 million in 2014-15 to a projected spend of under £85 million in the current financial year.

I am finalising proposals to introduce a standardised fee structure for legal representation in family cases and for expert witnesses in criminal and civil cases. I am developing proposals for the reform of

remuneration for the Court of Appeal. I am also making adjustments to the type of cases that can be funded through legal aid. Administration costs are being addressed through a transformation programme in the Legal Services Agency that includes a digitalisation programme. I am considering the recommendations in the access to justice part 2 report and will bring forward an updated strategy for legal aid. I will consider relevant recommendations from the Gillen review to ensure that we take a strategic approach to reform. Those measures will help to deliver a legal aid system that is fit for purpose in the 21st century and protects access to justice for the most vulnerable.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her answers. Does she recognise the need for the Department of Justice and legal services to implement and drive change? A recent Public Accounts Committee report came to this conclusion:

"What we have found in this inquiry is that these reforms have not been implemented effectively and the costs of legal aid have continued to climb. We are seeing average annual costs of £102 million per year since 2011 — this is simply unacceptable."

Do you recognise that there has been failure, that there is a real fear in the Department of Justice to drive change and that management is weak and ineffective?

Ms Sugden: No, I do not see a failure. That PAC report focused on the figure of £106 million, and I recognise, as a number of Members have, that that is not insignificant. However, a figure that we also need to focus on is the projected spend for this year, which is £85 million. That is a £21 million reduction. That is not insignificant. If that is not driving change through my Department, I am not sure what is.

I do not dispute that further reform is needed. That is something that my officials are working on. However, to be fair, we need to give the reforms a chance. Perhaps some people will say, "Well, that's easy for you to say when it's as significant a figure as it is". We have to understand the purpose of legal aid: it is about providing access to justice for the most vulnerable in our society. Should we not do that any more? The figures are so significant because it is demand-led. The only realistic way of reducing legal aid is to stop that demand. Do Members want to tell the most

vulnerable in society that they cannot have legal aid?

Mr Dunne: It needs to be controlled.

Ms Sugden: Perhaps it does need to be controlled, Mr Dunne, but you tell me how we can do that without cutting off access to justice for the most vulnerable in our society.

Court Estate: Costs

8. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Justice to outline any discussions she has had with the Chief Constable and acting Director General of the Prison Service regarding additional costs falling to their organisations as a result of her decision to not proceed with the rationalisation of the court estate. (AQO 925/16-21)

Ms Sugden: While the anticipated saving will not be realised as a result of my decision not to close courthouses across Northern Ireland at this stage, there are no additional costs for the Police Service of Northern Ireland or the Northern Ireland Prison Service. As I explained to the Assembly on 26 October, I reached my decision in the context of a changing justice environment as a result of the Executive's Programme for Government; the publication of the review of civil and family justice, published by Lord Justice Gillen; my focus on problem-solving justice; and the developing digital justice environment. In addition, I was conscious of the widespread concern in local communities about the adverse impacts that the closures would have on access to justice, many of which have been clearly articulated by Members across the House.

As I have previously explained, I want to allow time for proposals for alternative uses of court buildings to be developed in the context of the Courts 2020 review and for full public consultation to be undertaken. In addressing the Assembly on 26 October, I recognised the financial pressures facing the justice system. My Department will continue to work with the Chief Constable, the acting director general of the Northern Ireland Prison Service and the chief executive of the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service to address the pressures within the financial constraints with which we all must operate.

3.15 pm

Mr Ford: If the Minister tells us that no costs are incurred by her decision, perhaps she could tell us what savings have been forgone.

Ms Sugden: I responded to the Member's question for written answer, so he should have those details within the next couple of days.

Mr Ford: No.

Ms Sugden: Yes, I did.

Let me reiterate: I think that not closing these courthouses provides us with an opportunity to look at the wider justice system. I cannot say at the outset of Question Time that I am not willing to transform justice and then close courts for the sake of cutting the bottom line. The courthouses are not closing for now, but if I have a successor, they can make the decision to do that. I just hope they remind the electorate when they do.

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

RHI Scheme: Public Inquiry

T1. **Mr McPhillips** asked the Minister of Justice, in considering the colossal public interest in the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scheme, to outline why she will not initiate an urgent public inquiry into this scheme, which has already squandered millions of pounds of taxpayers' money. (AQT 666/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Sure. As I have reiterated time and time again, although the message seems to have got lost for some people, it is not possible for me, as Justice Minister, to instigate a public inquiry. I will explain why. The RHI scheme does not fall within my remit. If there are inferences of corruption or fraud, again, under the Inquiries Act 2005, it is not possible to conduct a public inquiry for criminal and civil matters. If I were to instigate a public inquiry I would have to do it in consultation with the Executive Committee, which no longer exists. Therefore, it is not possible for me, as the Minister of Justice, without overlooking the Northern Ireland Act 1998 — essentially, the Good Friday Agreement — and the subsequent St Andrews Agreement, to undertake this.

Mr McPhillips: I have the Inquiries Act 2005 in front of me, and it actually says you can call an inquiry. Perhaps it has not been amended yet.

However, the Minister will be aware that we are now facing into an election and we will not resolve the RHI scandal; indeed, RHI payments will continue into the millions for months to come. Will the Minister, in the best interests of

the people of Northern Ireland, free herself from the DUP/Sinn Féin puppet strings and finally do what is right and commit to instigating a public inquiry before 2 March?

Ms Sugden: Maybe the Member has not had the advantage of being Justice Minister for the past eight months, but I know that you cannot read a piece of legislation in isolation. Are you honestly asking me to overlook the Northern Ireland Act, which came out of the Good Friday Agreement, just to satisfy words you read on a piece of paper? It is not possible, Mr McPhillips, and I think that what you are suggesting to me is actually quite party political. I am an independent, and I will remain an independent. I am not instigating a public inquiry because I do not want to; I legally cannot do so. That is the legal advice that has been given to me on that.

Yes, there needs to be transparency in the renewable heat incentive scheme, but let me remind the House that there is a very expensive mechanism for holding the Northern Ireland Executive to account. It is called the Assembly, and the Public Accounts Committee is one of the mechanisms in that. But do you know what? I will fully support a public inquiry if that is what the people need for transparency in this issue. I think at this time you should stop party politicking, get on with trying to satisfy the constituents that put you in a job and see what happens after the election.

Staff:Prisoners Ratio in Northern Ireland

T2. **Mr Logan** asked the Minister of Justice for ratio of staff to prisoners in Northern Ireland and to state how it compares with the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQT 667/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I do not have those figures to hand, but it has been suggested to me that the ratio of staff to prisoners in Northern Ireland is considerably more significant than it is in other parts of the UK. That essentially means we have more prison staff to prisoners than any other part of the United Kingdom.

Mr Logan: I thank the Minister for the answer. Is that something you want to review, to bring it more into line with the rest of the United Kingdom?

Ms Sugden: I have always said that Northern Ireland is not the same as England and Wales. I think our unique circumstances in Northern Ireland relating to the legacy and the troubles of

the past certainly mean we cannot look at it through the lens of what is happening in England and Wales. I also think we need to do what is possible to ensure the safety of prison officers, for a start, and the safety of prisoners. Indeed, the ongoing reviews and any reviews that will look at this, particularly with the new director general in post, will need to be mindful of the circumstances of Northern Ireland.

Illegal Drugs: Maximum Sentence

T3. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Justice, following the drug-related deaths in Coagh, County Tyrone just before Christmas — with two in a very small area, they have hit the community very hard — to state the maximum sentence for the supply of illegal drugs. (AQT 668/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I cannot give you a figure off the top of my head, and it would not be appropriate or responsible to do so. We need to look at sentences, however, and the sentencing review that I announced early in my tenure will enable us to do that. We need to send out a strong message about how drugs devastate families and people across Northern Ireland. Perhaps increasing sentences through a sentencing review, if that is what is suggested, is a way of doing that.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her answer. When do you see that review being completed? Do you have any timescales?

Ms Sugden: The sentencing review is ongoing and looks at various elements of sentencing and the offences that we sentence people for. There will therefore be no conclusion to the review, although you may see its outworkings at different intervals.

Tony Taylor: Ongoing Incarceration

T4. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Justice whether she is aware of the case of Tony Taylor, who has been incarcerated for 10 months after having had his licence revoked, albeit he has not been charged with any offence and no evidence or information to support his imprisonment has been forthcoming. (AQT 669/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I am familiar with that case, and it is a matter for the Secretary of State in the Northern Ireland Office to deal with.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am aware of where jurisdiction for the case

lies. The Minister will understand, however, that this has been an extremely distressing time for the Taylor family. Would she be prepared to meet the family with me and perhaps make representation on their behalf thereafter, or at least establish the facts around the case with the Secretary of State?

Ms Sugden: As always, I am willing to have a conversation with any Members on any issue that they want to raise with me. Therefore, if Mr Durkan wants to get in touch with my diary secretary, we can arrange that.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Historical Military Prosecutions

T6. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Justice whether she is aware of recent reports of plans to curb the potential prosecutions of military personnel. (AQT 671/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Only through what I have read in the media, Mr Dunne. Nothing has been brought to me in an official capacity.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she recognise the need for such measures to be put in place to limit the potential for ex members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary to be prosecuted under the so-called legacy investigations?

Ms Sugden: That is a matter, ultimately, for the British Government and the Secretary of State, but I recognise the concern that there is around the issue and implore anyone involved to address it as soon as possible.

Prison Officers: Sickness Levels

T7. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to sickness associated with prison officers, whether there is any record of how we relate in the table associated with sickness levels associated with the prison officers in comparison to what happens in other jurisdictions. (AQT 672/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I am trying to understand what the Member is asking. If he is asking whether sickness levels here are comparable to those in other parts of the United Kingdom, I will be honest and say that I do not know the figures. We could do a comparison, but, as I said in answer to a previous question, it is not appropriate to compare what happens in Northern Ireland prisons to what happens in prisons in England and Wales. Those are two

very different perspectives, and we need to be mindful when people suggest comparisons.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for her answer. I have had occasion to speak to a number of prison officers who have indicated that they are under excessive stress and suffering from a lack of support. What mechanisms is the Minister putting in place to ensure that there is support to ensure that they are safe in their working environment?

Ms Sugden: I recognise those concerns, and I am always keen to meet members of the Prison Service; indeed, on my last visit to Maghaberry, it was important to me that I heard the views of officers on the ground. There is that concern, and there is that stress around the difficulties relating to the job, particularly in Northern Ireland prisons. Prison officers need to be supported more than they are currently, and I have been trying to explore ways to do that. Ultimately, we need to look at the levels of staff in our prisons. Sickness levels do not help, but that perpetuates the cycle because, if people feel stressed, they go off sick.

As I said, we have just completed a recruitment campaign, and officers were recruited at the end of last year. To some extent, that will ease the pressure. I am exploring the roll-out of body-worn cameras right across prison staff so that they feel that they are being protected in some way in relation to the challenges that they face. As I mentioned earlier to a Member, I think that PRRT is a way of providing support services, and I am really keen to see that rolled out as soon as possible, not just for serving prison officer staff but for retired prison officers. There are concerns from my perspective about both physical and mental health in our prisons, and it is something that I am really keen to tackle.

Mr Speaker: Sinéad Bradley is not in her place.

Welfare Reform Appeals

T9. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister of Justice what engagement she and her officials have had with the Minister for Communities about the potential increase of welfare reform appeals. (AQT 674/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I am not aware of any engagement. That is not to say that there has not been any happening. Does the Member want to clarify how that relates to my Department specifically? I might then be able to give him a more defined answer.

Mr Allen: Yes, Minister, I was looking to see whether you were satisfied that the appeals service has adequate resources to deal with the potential increase in appeals as a result of welfare reform. Can you also give a commitment that those in receipt of mitigation will not be prioritised over those who are not?

Ms Sugden: I beg the pardon of the Member: he is alluding to the appeals service, and that power has not transferred to my Department yet. It will transfer from, I think, April. There are ongoing discussions with the appeals service and the two Departments in relation to that transfer of power. I am aware of that.

Mr Speaker: I will treat that as your supplementary, Mr Allen. Mr Colin McGrath is not in his place. That concludes topical questions to the Minister. I ask the House to take its ease for a few minutes.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Health

Bannview Medical Practice

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

Mrs Dobson: Will the Minister of Health outline the measures she is taking following the withdrawal of the GP contractor confirmed to accept the contract to run the Bannview Medical Practice?

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health): The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) widely advertised the GP contract for Bannview practice, met a number of practices and held an information evening with practices in the surrounding areas. It also provided information and support that would be available to a new contractor taking on the Bannview practice. Despite all of its efforts, no applications were received by the closing date of 2 December 2016. The HSCB continued its efforts to secure a contractor for the Bannview practice, and, having identified an interested GP, it held a number of very positive meetings with the prospective contractor. Consequently, on 5 January 2017, a new GP contractor confirmed to the Health and Social Care Board that they would take on the Bannview Medical Practice from early March 2017. Yesterday, unfortunately, that contractor officially withdrew their intention to take on the practice. This is an extremely disappointing development, and I met the HSCB today to ensure that patients will continue to receive safe and high-quality healthcare and that all possible options for a permanent solution are being considered.

The HSCB has confirmed to me that it is actively seeking to secure a permanent GP contractor to take over the Bannview practice. It is also exploring other options, including the Southern Trust taking on the contract for Bannview. The board will continue to manage the practice and ensure that GP services are provided to patients whilst it works to secure a new contractor to take over the practice. No decision has been made to close the practice. I fully appreciate that patients are concerned

about the current situation, but I reassure them that every effort is being made to secure a permanent solution for the practice and that the board will write to all patients to advise them of the current arrangements.

3.30 pm

In 'Health and Wellbeing 2026', I set out the importance of primary care, and I have confirmed my intention to invest significantly in it. The future model of primary care must be focused on keeping people healthy and well, and it must be based on multidisciplinary teams embedded around general practice. I have already announced plans to have named district nurses, health visitors and social workers for every GP practice as well as plans to support the development of new roles such as physician associates and advanced nurse practitioners. Our continued investment in practice-based pharmacists will see over 100 in place in the near future. I also intend to invest in technology to help to transform the way in which general practice works and to improve services to patients. To that end, I have confirmed the further roll-out of the askmyGP system. Given my focus on supporting and investing in primary care, I have also announced an increase to 111 GP training places over the next two years.

There has been significant investment in GP-led services over recent years. This year, 2016-17, saw the investment of up to £7 million in GP services following contract negotiations, building on an investment of up to £5 million made last year. Those commitments, which will help to ease the workload of GP pressures and attract more doctors into general practice, will build on the already significant investment in general practice over recent years and reflect some of the recommendations of the GP-led working group. I have accepted all of that group's recommendations as signalling the direction of travel needed to ensure that everyone here continues to have access to high-quality, sustainable GP-led services.

Mr Speaker: If the Minister needs more than the two minutes to answer a question, she should just ask.

Mrs Dobson: Minister, this is a desperate situation that has caused real anger in Portadown and has the potential to impact on the health of all patients of the health centre, creating a domino effect across practices. Portadown must be prevented from becoming Humpty Dumpty. What is your response to the anger of the patients in Portadown? Was the

contract signed as a stalling tactic because of the patient rally that had been organised?

Mrs O'Neill: I say to all patients that they will continue to receive safe clinical services and that the board will monitor that. We have medical and nursing cover in place. We have arrangements with the Dalriada practice for out of hours and independent prescribers, all working collectively as part of a team to make sure that patients have access to first-class GP services, which they are rightly entitled to. It is important that we do not scaremonger but are responsible about this. I will ensure that the board, as I have asked it to do, writes to every member of the surgery to make sure that they are fully abreast of the situation.

I assure you that I do not make public announcements on the back of a potential public rally or anything like it; I made the announcement about the Bannview practice because a contractor had, in fact, confirmed that he was going to take on the practice. Since then, he has realised that he is not able to fulfil the obligations of the contract. That is why we have found ourselves in this situation. As of lunchtime yesterday, the contractor has officially confirmed to the board that he is no longer able to enter into the contract with the Department.

What is most important is that patients continue to receive safe clinical services, and the board, as I said, will monitor that. Ultimately, we need a permanent solution. This is, obviously, a temporary arrangement to make sure that we support the patients on the ground.

Mrs Dobson: How long?

Mrs O'Neill: It is a temporary arrangement. We are working towards making sure that we have a permanent solution. We have to be creative about how we do that. Long gone are the days when the only solution to GP services was when GPs became independent contractors — individual businesspeople in their own right. The make-up of the GP workforce is now more female, and more people want a bit more flexibility. Not every GP wants to be a contractor; some want to be salaried, so we need to move towards that. We are engaged with the Southern Trust on how it can get involved and play its role. I believe that what we have in place now is making sure that we provide safe patient services.

I accept absolutely that people are worried about the future of their GP practice. That is understandable. I also accept that the

surrounding GPs, who are under tremendous pressure, as we already know, are feeling the impact of it all. What we need here is a permanent solution, and I assure all the patients that this is what we are working towards. What we have in place now is a temporary solution, but I assure you, following a meeting that I had with the board earlier today, that there is GP cover, medical cover and nursing cover in place for the next six weeks. They will continue to make sure that we have rotas filled and cover that until we have a permanent solution.

There are a number of options for a permanent solution. The fact is that only one GP expressed an interest in the advertisement to come forward. That is a wider issue in relation to the recruitment of GPs. We have to look at other ways of having GPs in place. Looking towards salaried GPs is one option that we need to explore an awful lot more.

Ms Lockhart: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. I have to say, Minister, that this has been a very worrying time for the people of Portadown, particularly those who are sick and very vulnerable at this time. We have sick children, and I know a lady of 102 who is very ill at this time, and this is causing undue distress for her and her family.

I believe that there was irresponsible politicking around stating that a contractor had been found when we all knew that there was difficulty and that it was not at an advanced stage. I call on you, Minister, to give assurances to the people of Portadown today that they will be looked after and that the level of care that they require will be provided by the contractors that you have put in place in this short-term period.

Mrs O'Neill: Let us be very clear again that patients will continue to receive very safe clinical care. Medical staff, nursing staff and prescribers are in place. They are all involved in making sure that patients receive first-class care. That is the guarantee that the board has given, and the board will continue to monitor that situation. Let us be very clear on the message that we are sending to the public. I am involved in responsible politicking, I assure you, and I would not make an announcement in relation to securing a contract if I did not believe that that was the case. When the board confirmed with me, the contractor had confirmed that he was willing to take up the position.

We find ourselves in a difficult situation, but we have to chart our way through it. The best way to do that is to find a permanent solution. I

have offered up how I believe we can do that. We are engaged with the Southern Trust around its potential involvement. That is looking towards salaried GPs. This practice had four GPs — two main contractors and two salaried GPs. One contractor left, and the other felt under pressure when the two salaried GPs went off on maternity leave. They did not receive the proper locum cover; they could not attract it. A combination of factors led us to this. We need to make sure that the public are assured that they have first-class GP services, and the board is making sure that that is in place. They will continue to monitor it, but we need a longer-term solution here and we are actively working to find that.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Without a doubt, the situation at Bannview is very serious, and we all hope that a solution can be achieved. However, sadly, it is symptomatic of a wider crisis engulfing general practice. The Minister announced, I think on 23 December, measures that she would implement to assist general practice, and that was very welcome. However, now, in the absence of an Executive and a Budget, what short-term measures can she implement to assist general practitioners to deliver care to patients in need?

Mrs O'Neill: You are right: on 23 December, I announced that I would take forward the recommendations of the GP-led working group, which charted out key issues that needed to be dealt with in the short, medium and longer term. I have said that I am wedded to making sure that we take those things forward. There is a range of issues. Without listing them all, it is about looking at multidisciplinary teams: who else can we put in to support the GP? As I said and recognise, GPs are under tremendous pressure, so we have to make sure that we do everything we can to support them. The best way that we can do that is to further enhance things like, for example, askmyGP. In the short term, we have committed to askmyGP being rolled out to an additional 30 surgeries. We have increased the number of pharmacists placed within GP services. Those are all things that will help to take the pressure off GPs in the immediate term.

The longer-term solution is looking at training more GPs, and I have already announced that I will do it. There is an absolute shortage, and the point that I made earlier is a really key one: traditionally, in the past, the GP workforce would have been male and of an older generation. There is an ageing population there. Now, a lot more females are employed. There are actually more females than males

employed as GPs. They do not all — not just the females, even the males — want to be independent contractors. Let us look at more flexible ways of allowing GPs to work. For example, can trusts be involved in contracting GPs to work for them and provide services for their communities? That is absolutely in line with my vision for health and social care. That is what we need to move towards.

It is a combination of factors. In the immediate term, we just need to keep working. The board and the trusts need to keep working with GPs to make sure that, for any areas that are identified as being under pressure — there are a number of them — we are forward planning, realising what is coming down the line, particularly in relation to retirements, and making sure that we have succession planning in place and plans to make sure that they can pick up the slack where other GPs perhaps retire, for example.

Mr Beattie: Minister, thank you for your answers so far. You did not create the problem in general practice; it has been a long-term problem through underinvestment. This is about 5,200 people in Bannview practice who are extremely scared at this time. On 5 January, you said that a contract had been secured. You went on to say:

"I can today confirm that a new contract provider will be in place from early March."

It raises this question: before you rushed out that statement, did you test that contractor to make sure that they had the wherewithal to take on the Bannview practice, or was this about getting something out quickly to put a sticking plaster on a problem and save face?

Mrs O'Neill: That is unhelpful. We should not scaremonger. Patients are worried, and we should all accept that. The best thing that you could do as an elected representative is to assure those patients that everything is being done to make sure that they have a service. *[Interruption.]* You can ask me a question and accept my answer or not; it is entirely up to you. The message that I want to send to patients is that absolutely everything is being done to make sure that there are clinician teams, medical teams, nursing staff and pharmacists all in place to provide the service in the meantime whilst we find a permanent contract.

It would not be in my interest to stand up and make a statement confirming that I had a contractor if I did not believe that I had a contractor. At that time, when I issued the statement, it was, first, to provide the clarity

about the situation that you had all been asking for and, secondly, to make sure that those patients were informed and knew exactly that something would be more permanent. At that moment in time, that is exactly what the contractor said that he could do. Unfortunately, for his own reasons, he has decided that he cannot fulfil the contract. We are now in a situation where, again, a contractor is absent. You are absolutely right: it is not of my making, but it is absolutely my determination to fix it.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for coming along today in relation to the issue. Bannview Medical Practice in Portadown is in crisis. It is a serious situation. When you come along and put out statements that a contractor has been secured and suchlike, people stop believing anything. They tell me that they are being told lie upon lie. They ask whether this was another lie that was used to stop the protest that was being set up last Friday evening or whenever it was, which they rightly called off, believing that they would get a contractor in place. They feel really let down. There has to be a solution to this.

Minister, do you not agree that now, more than ever, is the time for you to focus all your time and energy on securing the best medical practice in Portadown Health Centre? Stop your politicking and make use of this time, instead of running around putting politics before Portadown Health Centre.

Mrs O'Neill: I am elected, so I believe that I am in politics. Let us be very clear about one thing: I believe in people power. If the people wanted to go to the streets, I absolutely support that. I would be with them on many occasions and have been over the years, so that is not a problem. Let us not pretend that there was some sort of attempt to dampen down the protest that may or may not have happened. I would not have had a problem with the protest happening: if people are that concerned, they can make their voices heard. That is not a problem.

Do not scaremonger. I am telling you that absolutely everything is being done. I am telling you that, as I stand before you today, clinician teams, medical teams, nurses, doctors and pharmacists are in the practice trying to provide the best possible service and the board continues to monitor it. I cannot say it any other way. It is a temporary solution. I want a permanent solution. I will use every bit of my best efforts to make sure that I find that permanent solution. I have done so continually and will continue to do so for as long as I hold office.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for coming today and answering Mrs Dobson's question. Given that you do not have your budget now, I am not as confident as I was a few months ago that you will be able to deliver on the reform process that you set out in your pathway that was influenced by Professor Bengoa.

This problem will get worse before it gets better, and it is very lamentable that we are now going into an election when we should be delivering on transformation.

3.45 pm

I was listening to the radio this morning, and a patient from Bannview was talking about the lack of information. I welcome the fact that you said that the Health and Social Care Board would be letting patients know. What are you doing in the interim to prevent those patients who are frail and elderly, as Ms Lockhart outlined, from going to emergency departments? At the minute, there is a lack of information, and, as we know, emergency departments are already under tremendous pressure, especially in that area.

Mrs O'Neill: I agree with you about keeping patients informed; they need to know exactly what is happening. A letter will be going out to them to inform them about the current situation.

You are right about the transformation journey. In *Delivering Together*, I set out the direction of travel for the next 10 years. All parties more or less signed up to that vision, and that is the transformation journey that we all recognise that we need to go on. It was also recognised very clearly across all staff, patients and the people with whom I engaged that people were starting to get excited about the transformation. They knew that it needed to happen and was long overdue. For the first time, people could start to see a way forward and the need to change radically how we do things. We were going to change the picture on the focus on primary care, including GPs and multidisciplinary teams. The fact that this will now be interrupted because of the scenario we find ourselves in is as disappointing to me as it is to you.

We are in this situation because people need to have confidence in these institutions. When you take tough decisions about transformation, education or any service, people need to have confidence in the integrity of these institutions and in the integrity of the Ministers of these institutions. Unfortunately, we are in this scenario because of the actions of the DUP and

its continued arrogance. For me, that is the biggest issue in relation to the lack of a Budget.

I say this to all Health and Social Care staff who have been taken to the top of the hill on the transformation journey: I want to get back to my desk. I want to make these institutions work, but they can work only on the basis of equality because that is the only way in which people will have confidence in the decisions that I take as a Minister or, for that matter, any Minister takes. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Members, the Minister must be heard when replying to questions.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Minister, to say that we are extremely disappointed is an understatement. I do not think that anyone is scaremongering. It is rather disappointing that you continually blame everything on the DUP's arrogance. As one member of this party, I have supported you 100% as Chair of the Health Committee, as we all did on the Health Committee. We decided to take the politics out of health; I still want to take the politics out of health.

We are at the end of the road when it comes to the GP crisis, especially in Portadown. It is not only in Portadown, however. This week, my colleague Mr Humphrey and I are meeting a GP practice that spans north and west Belfast. This is becoming a Belfast issue as well. I still want to support the way forward. I still want to support the stuff that you talked about today in bringing about a better way of working in GP practices, multidisciplinary teams and social workers.

I hear what you are saying. What I want to know is this: when will we see it? We need to see it as soon as possible. I do not know how far down the line we are with Portadown and whether we will ever save it, but GP practices across Northern Ireland are crying out for help. Multidisciplinary teams, social workers and whoever else need to be put into those practices ASAP to save all our other practices in Northern Ireland.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her contribution. I agree and am as disappointed as you are or anybody else is about this contract that we thought was secured but has now fallen through. Nobody is more disappointed than I am. I thought that patients could finally feel comforted by a permanent solution. We do not yet have a permanent solution, but I believe that one is there. We must make sure that people feel assured by the

temporary arrangements; that is the responsible thing to do. We must make sure that people and patients feel assured that what is there now is clinically safe, there are services in the practice for patients, and the board will continue to monitor it.

We have to find the longer-term solution. I believe that we can push the boundaries and do things that have not been done before. The Southern Trust needs to step up. As the Member rightly said, we had a good relationship and engagement with the Health Committee, which I welcome. I absolutely believe in taking the politics out of health; it is the only way to deal with the issue. Going forward, I am as wedded to that transformation journey as I ever was. I have very much enjoyed my seven months as Health Minister. I believe that the transformation journey and the Delivering Together document, which most people were able to sign up to, is the most positive work that the health service has seen in quite a number of years. People were up for the change; they were up for the transformation. However, the reality is — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs O'Neill: The reality is that in order for people to have confidence in the tough decisions that need to be taken for transformation and where we need to go, they needed to have confidence in the integrity of these institutions, that decisions are being taken for the right reasons, and to know that the Ministers taking decisions have integrity and equality at their core and that they do not disrespect the issues of — *[Interruption.]* Back-Bench Members can shout all they wish. The reason we are in this situation is DUP arrogance, pure and simple.

Mr Aiken: *[Interruption.]* Gentlemen. I thank the Minister for her comments so far and for coming through. On a point of clarification, you mention Dalriada. Dalriada out-of-hours service is excellent; I have used it many times for my children. However, the Minister must be aware that it is under severe pressure, and it is based in Ballymena. How will it cover the people of Portadown?

Mrs O'Neill: There are arrangements in place in terms of a phone triage service. That can be provided no matter where you are. The board is confident that that arrangement works. It works for Dalriada; it is happy to provide the service. It is part of the interim solution to provide services for people. I cannot stress enough that we should not scaremonger; let us

give patients the comfort that they need. If people are sick and need services, they deserve to be supported and get all the information possible. I make sure that that happens, and I will make sure that they receive letters to confirm exactly the case that we are in. I will make sure that, every day I am in office, we will work to provide a permanent solution. However, let us be very clear: a temporary, interim solution is in place. This is about patients and about making sure that they know that what can be provided for them is being provided. We are all responsible for that. I can give that assurance.

Mr Beggs: GP services are vital, particularly for the old and very young, but indeed for any of us who may have an ailment. It must be of great concern to all of us that the Health and Social Care Board, the Department and the Minister, are unable to ensure that there are alternative GP services available in Portadown. Given that no Budget is set for 2017-18 and that we face an election, will the Minister advise what action she can take to ensure that there are GP services for all citizens in Northern Ireland? My own constituents are patients of the Antrim coast medical practice where a similar situation is emerging, as the long-serving GP, Dr Glover, is retiring after many years of valiant service at the end of March.

Mrs O'Neill: The board is working with the practice and with local GPs to find a solution to the Glenarm situation. I believe that we can find a solution to covering the practice that is to be vacated. There are solutions. We are working in advance and making sure, as I said earlier, that we are planning for change that we know will happen, such as potential resignations that are coming down the line. We are making sure that all the things are in place. That work is ongoing; the board does not stop working. It will continue to work to make sure that we have something in place for Glenarm and for the wider Cushendall and east Antrim area.

In relation to the Budget, I am as disappointed as anybody that I cannot continue with my transformation journey. I can keep rehearsing it if you wish: we are in this scenario because of the arrogance of the DUP, its lack of integrity, and its failure to listen to the public on the latest RHI scandal. I do not want to be here, but, unfortunately, we are.

Mrs Barton: Minister, I hear what you say about Portadown. Unfortunately, that situation is about to be replicated in County Fermanagh, where over 30% of GPs are due to retire in the

next two years. What steps are you taking at the moment and in future to mitigate the problem of surgeries not being filled?

Mrs O'Neill: Fermanagh is another issue on which I am in ongoing conversation with the board. The board is actively engaged with neighbouring GPs to try to provide services, and it is looking at the best configuration of those services. Nobody is sitting on their hands. That work is ongoing, and we are making sure that we are planning for the future. We know the challenges in Fermanagh; they are actively being worked on.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Minister, for attending. The first tentacles of this news broke late last week, and we were getting little feeds of information. In the week in which you allege that DUP arrogance has brought these institutions to their knees, I have sat on the Health Committee, where your party did not feel fit to represent the constituents that you have concern for today. What confidence can you give the people of Northern Ireland, as part of an Executive, up until last week, that the two parties before us actually have the health of the people whom we represent at their core, and that this is not all politicking?

Mrs O'Neill: I take my responsibility very seriously. Since I have come into post, I have been out, I have been engaging and I have been talking to patients, carers and staff, anywhere that anybody wanted to chat, about their current issues and feelings about the health service. I very quickly picked up on the key issues that needed to be addressed. I have set out the transformation journey; I have set out the direction of travel; I have set out a plan on how we can transform the health and social care system. People have really got on board with that plan. There absolutely is goodwill for it, and people want it to work. Unfortunately, because of the scenario that we are in, we cannot deliver, or, at least, it is going to be interrupted. As I said in relation to the transformation journey that I have embarked on, it is as disappointing for me as it is for anybody else. However, the plan is there, the strategy is there and a lot of work was done in the first seven months. I had set out a number of key issues which we would deliver in year 1, and we are well on our way to delivering all of them. For me, that is the key. It has to be about that transformation. We have to deliver real and meaningful change. I have been up for it. I think that anybody who works in the health service can see that I was up for that transformation.

Mr Speaker: Members, that concludes the item of business. I ask Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

4.00 pm

Opposition Business

Failure of the Executive

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly recognises the grave consequences for the people of Northern Ireland of the failure of the Executive to agree a Budget and Estimates for the financial year 2017-18, the failure of the Executive to endorse a Programme for Government and the continuing failure of the Executive to safeguard the interests of the people of Northern Ireland following the result of the EU referendum. — [Mr Nesbitt.]

Which amendment was:

Insert after "2017-18,"

"the failure of the Executive to set a regional rate for 2017-18,". — [Dr Farry.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Mr Christopher Stalford. The Member will have five minutes.

Mr Stalford: Northern Ireland, I believe, is a better place than it was 10 years ago. I think that we can be proud of the fact that our country is more at peace with itself than it was 10 years ago. I think that we can be proud of the investment that has been made in jobs, in local services and in improving public services.

I listened to the self-serving contribution from Mr Nesbitt earlier in the debate. Who could believe from his contribution that his party presided over a situation in which some of the worst terrorist murderers in the history of this country — I see he sighs. I think it is unfortunate that you do not like to be reminded of the record of your party. Some of the worst terrorist murderers in the history of this country, including people like Sean Kelly who bombed the Shankill Road, were released from prison without the decommissioning of IRA weaponry or even a commitment to support policing and the rule of law. When you mount your high horse and point your finger at others, sir, you should recall that there are three pointing back at you. Any unionist who knows the record of the way in which the Ulster Unionist Party behaved will not be lectured on our approach to dealing with republicans.

I believe that Northern Ireland is a better place. I believe that it is in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland that we have devolved institutions that work for the people. I heard the criticism that was levelled by Mr Nesbitt: "10 long years". He seems to forget that, for nine and a half of those long years, his party was in government. Therefore, when you mount your high horse and lecture about "10 long years" of failed devolution, remember that, if it was a failure, sir, your party was party to it for nine and a half of those 10 years — 95% of the time.

I believe that all parties, whether the SDLP, the Ulster Unionists, the DUP, the Alliance Party or Sinn Féin, can look back over the past 10 years and point to achievements, on an individual level and a collective level, that were made during the period. They can point to positive steps that were taken by all the parties to improve the life of the people of Northern Ireland. That is where I believe in devolution. That is the value of devolution. The value of devolution lies in using those tools to improve the lot of our constituents. That is why I was in the Chamber for the question for urgent oral answer by Michelle O'Neill. I have to say that, as I listened to the Minister describing her plans for health and social care in Northern Ireland and for how we are going to move forward, I found myself wondering, "What planet is she on?", because we all know that we are now headed to elections and probably to talks, with no devolution. Mr Eastwood said yesterday in the House that elections to talks, with probably no devolution, means direct rule Ministers making the decisions concerning Northern Ireland. I do not want that any more than any other person does, even people whom I disagreed with on the European referendum question. I do not want a Tory Government making decisions for my constituents any more than Members from the SDLP or other parties do, because I do not trust them to act in the best interests of my constituents any more than you do. It is profoundly sad that it has come to this, but I think that we need to be honest. The reason that we are at this point is that one party — Sinn Féin — did not like the outcome of the election, and it saw in RHI an opportunity to have a rerun. It has not been talking about —

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

Mr Stalford: I will. It has not been talking about RHI. It has been listing various nationalist and republican totems in the run-in to the election.

We will face Sinn Féin on those issues, and we will prevail in the election.

Mr Eastwood: We are here to talk about the failure of the Executive, and all that you have to do is look around. I do not even need to make a speech to illustrate the failure of this Executive, but I will give it a go. It is utterly surreal what is going on in this Building today. The oxygen has been dragged out of this place, and the public are just bemused. People keep talking about the anger on the streets. People are not angry — they are utterly furious that we have got to this point.

Some of us went into an election last year and said that we would go to a Programme for Government negotiation after the election, as was outlined in the so-called Fresh Start Agreement. I went into those negotiations. We did our homework. We had papers written. We put the papers in on all manner of subjects, topics and areas, but nobody wanted to negotiate back. Nobody wanted to talk to us about how we can invest in the Irish language, protect equality for LGBT people and tackle poverty and discrimination right across our society. Nobody wanted to talk to us about how we can expand opportunities for students, develop our economy and build our infrastructure. Nobody wanted to talk back. It reminds me a bit of today, given that there is nobody here. People who are well paid to be here are not here to have "meaningless" discussions. Well, they are not meaningless to the people on the street.

They can go and put their posters up today if they want; some of us are here to do business, and we will be here until the very end.

It is, of course, true that because of the DUP's despicable and disgraceful behaviour, not just around RHI, we have got to this point. It is also true that they were let do all those things. They were allowed to do all those things. It is not three or four weeks since a draft Programme for Government was announced and hailed by Sinn Féin and the DUP. There was no Irish language Act, no anti-poverty strategy, no LGBT rights legislation — none of that. None of it. We were all called whingers and opposition for opposition's sake for pointing it out. Now, all of a sudden, it is stuff that they just could not stand for. They said they were calling time on the DUP status quo. When did it become the DUP status quo? Only a few weeks before that, we were told that this is what delivery looks like. Well, it looks pretty bare today.

We are faced today with the biggest economic, social and political crisis to face these islands

since partition. We have a Tory Government who are determined to bring about a hard Brexit, which would destroy everything that we have built — everything that is left of it. It would destroy our economy, destroy our Good Friday Agreement and destroy everything that we have. Theresa May said a lot of things today, but what did she say? She has got a paper from the Scottish Government and a paper coming from the Welsh Government. She did not mention anything coming from this Executive — nothing at all. Seven months and nothing at all from our Executive. People can go to the microphone on the Falls Road and complain about Theresa May's speech today, but they did not even put anything on paper to the British Prime Minister or the British Government to tell them that we need to protect our citizens here — our citizens here who voted 56% to remain as part of the European Union.

Tomorrow marks an important day for a man called John Hume. It is his 80th birthday. He is someone who built these institutions and who democratically struggled to ensure that we could have these institutions and that we could be part of an open Europe. In his Nobel Peace Prize speech, he said:

"I want to see Ireland — North and South — the wounds of violence healed, play its rightful role in a Europe that will, for all Irish people, be a shared bond of patriotism and new endeavour.

I want to see Ireland as an example to men and women everywhere of what can be achieved by living for ideals, rather than fighting for them, and by viewing each and every person as worthy of respect and honour.

I want to see an Ireland of partnership where we wage war on want and poverty, where we reach out to the marginalised and dispossessed, where we build together a future that can be as great as our dreams allow."

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

Mr Eastwood: If people still believe in that, they have an opportunity on 2 March to give voice to that and put an end to this nonsense that we have had for the last 10 years.

Mrs Cameron: Given the events of yesterday, should anyone be listening to this debate today, they could be forgiven for thinking that we are merely fiddling while Rome burns. There are, however, some important points to be made,

and I will take a few moments to highlight some of them.

First and foremost, I want to say sorry to my constituents for the failure of this Assembly to function properly and that they are being asked to go to the polls again. I deeply regret that and can only apologise to them. It is not what I want, nor is it, I suspect, what most Members in this House want. Nevertheless, we are where we are.

The parties that tabled this motion will, no doubt, see today as an opportunity for self-congratulation at the collapse of the institutions under the weight of their strategic and well-thought-out opposition, but I would caution against that. They have, individually and collectively, failed to lay a glove on my party or on Sinn Féin. Rather, they have relied on the media to perform the function of opposition where they play catch-up. They pause only to check the latest revelation on Twitter before heading off to their respective news outlets. Perhaps they should go into the election asking their voters to vote for some of the journalists who can at least perform the function of scrutiny that they have singularly failed to do — oh no, wait; they have already tried running journalists but with little or no electoral success.

I should probably not be too hard on the UUP or the SDLP. Like my party, they, too, have suffered at the hands of Sinn Féin's strategy.

They are pale imitations of their former selves, hollowed out and rattling around the corridors like political Miss Havishams, desperately seeking to be relevant but finding themselves rejected time after time by the electorate because people know that they are no more able to deliver change now than they ever were when they were in government themselves.

This is not the first time that the Assembly has collapsed in crisis. Over the years, it has collapsed, been suspended and been reviewed, and it remains to be seen whether it can be returned. One thing is common to all these failures: the role of Sinn Féin. Ask the SDLP what it felt like to be eaten alive by a party that it brought in from the cold. Ask the Ulster Unionists what it felt like to be on the wrong end of a spy ring run by their then partners in government.

It seems to be the case that it does not matter who is in government: if Sinn Féin is not getting what it wants, we have to have a crisis. It does not matter whether the coalition is mandatory or voluntary: if Sinn Féin is involved, we are all

subject to Gerry's latest plan, and there is nowhere to go if you will not play ball.

At the Felons Club a few weeks ago — we are fortunate that the cameras were there to record it as, by now, Gerry has probably forgotten that he was ever in the Felons Club — Gerry Adams demanded that Arlene Foster do what society demanded of her. Let us let that just sink in for a moment. Gerry Adams seeing himself as the reasoned voice of society is a bit like getting childcare advice from Jimmy Savile. I did not hear Gerry asking for society's approval when he was shielding paedophiles, rapists and murderers, and that was long after the Good Friday Agreement was signed. I did not hear him — or Conor Murphy, for that matter — ask the republican killers of Paul Quinn and Robert McCartney to hand themselves in to the police because society demanded that they did the right thing.

There was no equality, rights or justice for Paul, Robert or any other post-agreement victim. That is the problem: one rule for Sinn Féin; a different rule for everyone else. There is no equality or justice if you are raped by an IRA man and no need to worry about rights or justice if you are the victim of someone acting under instruction from the army council. If you stand up for what you believe in politically and challenge that status quo, that is not at all acceptable to Gerry. He does not like that very much at all. Sorry, Gerry, but we are not all fatherless children, and we do not need you to break us any more. We have had quite enough of your egomania for one lifetime.

In the last few days, it has been pointed out to us repeatedly how much we must change in order to be acceptable to Sinn Féin. As we head to the polls, I will be listening to my electorate, not Sinn Féin. I bitterly regret the mess of RHI and the effect that it has had on the public purse and on public confidence in this place, but perhaps it is a wake-up call that we all need to put public services first and repay the faith of those who sent us here.

One thing I am confident of is that when it comes to defining what is right, truthful and just, I am much more content with Arlene Foster's definition than I will ever be with that of Gerry Adams.

Mrs Overend: It gives me no pleasure to outline the failures of the Executive. Clearly, the Executive parties are in election mode now. Only a few weeks ago, the DUP and Sinn Féin were representing each other in TV studios. Now, one from each party speaks on the radio, and they are poles apart.

It is easy to sit back and complain about the situation and the fact that we are returning to the polls, but this motion was tabled before the election was called. It is easy to refer to the failures of an Executive in place since May last year.

As education spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party, it would be remiss of me not to begin with the complete failure of the Executive and the Education Minister to deliver for our young people and deal with the long-standing issues faced by the Department of Education, the Education Authority and, most importantly, the front-line services that we all rely on: our schools, our youth services and childcare. There is the failure to find a resolution to the long-standing dispute over teachers' pay; the failure to confirm three-year budgets; the failure to deliver a childcare strategy; the failure to deliver an integrated campus at Strule within budget; the failure to deal conclusively with the issue of post-primary transfer; the failure to spend the £50 million allocated for capital projects this year under the Fresh Start Agreement; and the ongoing inability to deal with, and complete failure to agree on, a sustainable way forward for education in Northern Ireland. With the looming threat of the area planning process, the Minister and his Executive colleagues are looking to front-line services like schools to find the savings.

4.15 pm

The impact of these failures has been shown most recently in proposals from the Education Authority to close a number of outdoor education centres across Northern Ireland. Recently, there was a leak from the Education Authority of further proposals to make cuts to school transport. What other leaks will there be over coming months? Will music lessons in schools or some other well-used service be next for the chop?

Furthermore, it is no secret that the Education Authority is being used as a vehicle to avoid the responsibility for decisions to initiate cuts. It is the front man for controversial proposals. On numerous occasions, we have heard the Minister utter the phrase, "These are not my proposals", but the Minister must take responsibility for proposals along with any final decisions made on these matters. The DUP Education Minister's complete inaction has left schools and other services provided and funded by his Department in an extremely precarious and tentative state. By this stage, much more should have been achieved by the Minister. None of this is rocket science. These are basic functions of government.

In my view, the overarching failure of successive Education Ministers has been the inability to agree on a joint strategy for education in Northern Ireland. All we have seen is a continuation of pet projects and schemes. No amount of these schemes and projects will ever solve the crisis in our education system. Instead, they will ensure its perpetuation. We need an Executive that will tackle these issues head on for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland.

Of course, an even more immediate failure of the Executive has to be the frightening situation in our health service. The scale of the current crisis engulfing our health service is completely unprecedented. The fact that, as we —

Mr Beattie: Thank you for giving way. Do you agree that the real outworking of this failed Executive can be seen in the faces of the 3,400 people in Lurgan and Portadown who have had to avail themselves of food banks in the last 12 months and the 5,200 people in Portadown who do not have a GP?

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

Mrs Overend: I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, it is an ongoing concern across Northern Ireland and not just in Upper Bann.

The fact that, as we stand here today, there are 250,000 outpatients waiting on an appointment is shocking. Worse still is the fact that the number of those waiting longer than 52 weeks has jumped from 20,000 to 40,000 over the last year. There are many tens of thousands more inpatients waiting for day treatment as well as key diagnostic tests.

These are real people that we are talking about here. These are people with real lives, real jobs and real families, who are being forced to wait a disgraceful length of time to be seen or to receive treatment. Whilst some may not like my choice of words, we must remember that it is a criminal offence to let animals suffer, yet this Executive has wilfully sat back and allowed people to dwell in pain on waiting lists. I have had countless constituents tell me that, in their desperation, they have gone back to their GPs and simply been prescribed further pain medication. It is a sad and damning indictment of this ongoing Executive that, in 2017, the NHS, the most cherished of public services, is tolerating pain rather than treating it. Whilst it would be easy to look at waiting lists —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Mrs Overend: There are so many issues that I could raise here. As I said at the beginning, it gives me no pleasure to see this Executive failing. The people of Northern Ireland deserve better.

Mr Logan: Like my colleague Pam Cameron, I find this to be a situation of deep regret, and it is with deep regret that I need to address the motion. Just eight months ago, shortly after being elected, I gave my maiden speech in the Chamber. I talked about the Programme for Government. In that speech, I focused on delivery: my commitment to delivery, my party's commitment to delivery, my focus on my constituents and my passion for delivering for them, and my party's commitment to Northern Ireland. My commitment to my people in North Antrim remains, and I am as passionate about that today as I was then.

I am absolutely committed to and sure that we need an Executive. As Christopher Stalford rightly set out, we need devolution in Northern Ireland.

Be in no doubt that this situation has impact. It has impact for the communities that we represent, including the people, the businesses and the organisations. Those are the very same people who we are here to support and protect. This is a very regrettable situation, but, of course, this is not a situation of our making. Be very clear on that. Let me remind you — *[Interruption.]* No, let me remind you and let me remind all in the House why Sinn Féin has pulled the plug. *[Interruption.]* No, if you listen, it will help you to understand.

In May 2016, the nationalist vote fell to the lowest level in 20 years. What we have here is Sinn Féin attempting a rerun of May. That reduced vote backs up what we have been saying: unionism is strong. This party has been saying that for a long time. With the DUP at the helm, unionism is strong and our relationship within the United Kingdom is strong and secure.

Ms Mallon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Logan: I am happy to give way.

Ms Mallon: Can the Member see at all that there is a very definite difference between strength and arrogance and that perhaps the arrogance of the DUP has helped to bring us to

this political precipice that we are all now lamenting?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

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

Mr Logan: I think that the Member does not understand the difference between arrogance and strength. This party is strong. We have shown that for years, and, as a result, we are stronger within the union today than we have been for a long time. We will not apologise for that.

Yes, this situation is regrettable and it is not of our making. Sinn Féin pulled the plug because it was unhappy in May and unhappy because of the European referendum result. This is just an attempt to backtrack on those things.

The republican agenda has failed. As we heard earlier, they failed when they ran a terrorist campaign in Northern Ireland in search of a united Ireland. They then entered politics after realising that had failed, giving up the battle with guns and bombs to enter a political battle. Again, a united Ireland is further away than ever. Sinn Féin has tried to mask the issue behind RHI, and they are no strangers to masks. The mask has slipped many times since last Monday. On Monday last week, Barry McElduff the Member for West Tyrone summed up Sinn Féin's actions. This paints a picture of the situation that we are in. The tweet said:

"We fight for equality. For respect. And for a United Ireland. That is why my comrade is resigning as Deputy First Minister this very day."

The mask slipped. There is the evidence. Read Martin McGuinness's resignation letter. The evidence is there. This is masked behind RHI.

We on these Benches do not dance to the tune of Sinn Féin. It is regrettable that some unionists did fall for the trap and demanded that Arlene Foster step aside without a shred of evidence against her. They jumped on the "Get Foster" campaign very quickly. Of course, these are the same unionists who apologised to Sinn Féin for the national anthem, so we on these Benches are certainly not surprised. Sinn Féin talks about equality, and we know what equality means. Gerry Adams gave us his definition of equality when he said that equality is:

"the trojan horse of the entire republican strategy".

He said that this is how we will break the — and we all know what Gerry Adams said.

The real devastating consequences of Sinn Féin's self-interested moves are the many services that will be affected, either due to a lack of a Budget or a lack of a Government to help set direction. This situation has destroyed any hope of agreeing a Budget for the next financial year. Without a Budget or Ministers, civil servants will take control of the purse strings, and that would limit what they can spend. David Sterling the permanent secretary said:

"A long period without a government would be difficult for us to manage."

Mr Allen: Will the Member give way?

Mr Logan: I have already given way, and I really need to get through this.

Mr Sterling continued:

"Our objective as civil servants would be to ensure minimal disruption ... but I wouldn't want to downplay the difficulties."

He goes on, but I do not have the time.

Just last week, I met school principals in the Ballymena area. These leaders of education brought me real issues that we need to address. I congratulate the Minister, Peter Weir, on the progress that he has made — so did those principals — but there is still much, much more to do. Further to this, I am disappointed that we have a generation of young people watching this and watching Sinn Féin's actions. They will look at this situation and learn a lesson that, when you do not get things your own way and when you get things tough, you throw in the towel and abandon ship. That is an absolutely shocking example. It is not something that this party will do. I am gravely concerned and absolutely exasperated. I want to help people: that is why I got into politics.

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

Mr Logan: I ran in 2016 to help people and to make their life better. Sinn Féin has made that so much more difficult.

Mr McGrath: I support the motion on the failures of the Executive. To begin, it is important to mention that the greatest failure of the Executive has been the monumental and overwhelming way in which it has attempted and succeeded in places to polarise our politics and sectarianise our institutions, and the gross way in which it has let down the aspirations and wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. There have been year-on-year reductions in the number of people turning out to vote and even bigger numbers switching off from politics. We in the House must ask ourselves why this is happening. What is turning people off politics? The answer is: RHI, NAMA, Red Sky, Research Services Ireland, SIF funding and Charter NI. The list goes on and on. There has been scandal after scandal.

This Executive, working as they have done for so many years with a silo mentality, have let loose Ministers who often had the mist of party politics blinkering their views rather than the good of the community that they serve. We have seen most acutely in the present Executive how divisive, ineffective, solo run Ministers running party agendas have brought this place to its knees as a result of their crass, selfish mentality.

Whilst this behaviour affects politics generally across our country and belittles and demeans our institutions in Stormont, the impact of the problem can end up lying much more locally. I think of how my constituency has been badly let down. A prime example is the failure of the Executive to deliver appropriate, sustainable health services at the Downe Hospital, which is almost a scandal in its own right. The £64 million newly built hospital had wards closed before its official opening day. Despite all the pressures that we face in accident and emergency units, a newly built unit in the Downe Hospital has been downgraded year after year to part-time status and — just about — a minor injuries unit at the weekend.

Whilst we hear of recruitment problems, financial pressures and service delivery burdens, the failure of the Executive is that they have not worked collectively to fix the problems. Did DETI or the new Department for the Economy attempt to assist with new university places? Did our employment services look to overseas recruitment? Did our Infrastructure Department even try to provide a direct bus service between two hospitals when the consultants refused to leave their ivory tower hospitals and go out into the sticks? So much is left to small units in big silo Departments to sort out, and, when they fail, they cry that it was too tough a job to do on their own.

Main Street in Downpatrick is a further example. For years, it has been neglected by this Executive. We, like many others, have had the heart ripped out of our town centre, and this Executive should have responded with joined-up working. The Department for the Economy should have delivered initiatives as economic drivers to help new starts and to specialise the focus on products. Our Finance Department should have looked at new tax regimes and developed business improvement initiatives. Our Communities Department should have directed and steered local councils to work on the ground to upgrade our town centres. Our Infrastructure Department should have monitored access to town centres to breathe new life into the way people get into them.

When I think of Market Street in Downpatrick, I realise that virtually every Department has its say and its work to do, but have we had the joined-up forward thinking from an innovative Executive required to do the work? Not on your nelly. We have had bluster, argument, bickering, petty, cheap point-scoring, a sectarian-based silo mentality and party political inactivity that has left the people of Northern Ireland in want, communities with their hearts ripped out and a public service delivered to an all-time low standard, matched only by the low level of faith that our electorate have in the institutions.

To have less than 50% of the electorate in places turning out for an election is an indictment of the inactivity.

4.30 pm

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

Mr McGrath: The Executive are not working for the people of Northern Ireland. They have failed them; they have let them down. The time has come for change in Northern Ireland for the good of people.

Mr Beggs: I support the motion and the amendment.

The fundamental role of any Government, and in Northern Ireland the Executive, is to take decisions that will improve the lives of the people. How have the DUP/Sinn Féin Executive fared with regards to the key aspects of any new Government, namely the Programme for Government, a legislative programme, and a Budget? There has been no output on each of those critical issues. The consultation on a Programme for Government

outcomes framework was about motherhood and apple pie. It included statements about wanting to enjoy healthy, active lives; wanting more people working in better jobs; and wanting to have a safe community where we respect the law and one another. However, we have heard nothing about the actions to deliver that; just nice words. It has not been finalised. Eight months after being elected, there is no agreed Programme for Government. What an indictment of those who lead the Executive. Similarly, if any Government are to bring about change, they need to improve the law of the land. Where is the legislative programme? The dysfunctional DUP/Sinn Féin Executive Office-led Government, which have been in power for eight months, have failed to produce a legislative programme.

One of the critical aspects of any Government is how they prioritise issues in their financial decisions. Where is the Budget for 2017-18? First, we were told that the draft Budget could not be produced because the Chancellor's spending review was being published in November. The Welsh Government decided to publish their draft Budget in advance in October, and the Scottish Government published theirs just before Christmas. In Northern Ireland, the draft Budget was expected to be published before Christmas, which would have left just a few weeks for public consultation and scrutiny. However, even a draft Budget has not been agreed by Sinn Féin/DUP leadership under the Executive Office. They cannot work together.

Committees have been unable to scrutinise. Many employees may well have received protective redundancy notices because their employers have no guarantees of funding come 1 April. Worse than that, the Sinn Féin deputy First Minister irresponsibly decided to resign without putting the 2017-18 Budget in place. The announcement of elections was made yesterday, so emergency measures that reflect previous funding will kick in. There must be huge uncertainty for vulnerable members of the public, for civil servants delivering public services, and for others funded by public funds.

Take health. We have suffered a year of growing waiting lists, and we were promised a new health reform and new money. What happened to the 2016 synchronised DUP/Sinn Féin election promise of an additional £1 billion a year? Where is that additional fund? Where is the Budget? It does not exist. Where is the great report; the great way forward? It has not even been published. If it were published now, what weight would it have? It would have none, because we are going into an election and

there is no commitment thereafter. The regional rate cannot be set because of the absence of the Budget. Without an agreed regional rate, rates bills cannot be sent out, but they will still have to be paid; we will all still have to pay. Monthly direct debits cannot be collected. Local government will suffer cash-flow problems.

Finally, there is the failure of the Executive to adopt agreed actions to protect the interests of Northern Ireland following the EU referendum decision for the UK to leave the European Union. There is great uncertainty, particularly in the business community about how it will be able to trade with European Union partners. I commend Northern Ireland Food and Drink for its Brexit report, which concisely highlights some of the great challenges facing Northern Ireland. It indicates that the average profit in its companies is 2.94% and that a hard Brexit would result in food tariffs of between 7% and 65%.

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

Mr Beggs: So we have £1.3 billion of food products — 28% of our production — at risk. What would happen? We must make sure there is a coherent Government giving direction and looking after the interests of the people of Northern Ireland, instead of this irresponsible lot we have at the minute.

Mrs Dobson: I take no pleasure in speaking on the motion today, but I do so as the Ulster Unionist Party health spokesperson. I wish to focus my comments on, as the motion says, the "grave consequences" for the health of our people of Northern Ireland.

It is, frankly, outrageous that one in five of our population is trapped on a hospital waiting list. It is even more outrageous that we were told last year we would have to wait until January to hear the Minister's comprehensive plan. It is shocking that there was not a plan already in place. However, it is most shocking that, if the Minister releases it, it will happen through a Sinn Féin press release that is paper thin, with no money or resources behind it and no prospect of making any real and meaningful difference to our constituents because of the lack of an agreed Budget. Shameful.

I want to turn my comments to the present GP crisis and pay tribute to the work of GP representatives. A rescue plan is needed, but, sadly, one is unlikely to come forward any time soon. Shameful. What is also shameful is the

action of the Department of Health and the Health and Social Care Board on the GP cover for the patients of Bannview practice in Portadown. That is an issue on which my colleague Doug Beattie and I have been working tirelessly. The latest twist is that a new contractor withdrew yesterday, days after they were appointed. Indeed, the board and the Minister told us they had been secured. That is why I tabled a question for urgent oral answer this afternoon to the Minister of Health. It is abundantly clear that those actions have failed the people of Portadown, and it is a clear and painful example, as the motion states, of how this Executive, in this instance through the Health Minister, are failing to:

"safeguard the interests of the people of Northern Ireland".

The GP crisis, as we know, threatens cover across Northern Ireland. That became abundantly clear given the number of Members who wanted to take part this afternoon. With hundreds of GPs considering resigning, that rescue package can no longer become a reality.

This is what happens when politics gets in the way of progress and when the political soap opera overtakes the practical job of actually working hard for our constituents. It is abundantly clear that the health service and, more importantly, the health of the people of Northern Ireland have become the main casualties of this political crisis.

I said I would take no pleasure in speaking on the motion. I urge an urgent resolution to the crisis at the Bannview practice and open and frank negotiations with GPs and their representatives before it is too late. I fear, however, that that time has already passed.

Mr Agnew: Over the Christmas recess I was contacted by the chief executive of a Belfast-based charity which has a project working with vulnerable families; it could be called an early intervention project. It is waiting to hear whether it will get the extended year funding that it was anticipating. Because there has been no Budget and no likelihood of a Budget, it is unlikely that it will hear. As a result, 45 staff have had to be put on notice and 700 service users will be let down. That is just one example of the many services that are under threat due to the failure of this Executive.

The traditional parties have wasted their opportunity to provide stable government in Northern Ireland, and I think the failure to

produce a Budget is the most damning thing, given its consequences.

Even if Mr Allister is wrong and the Civil Service can implement 75% of the Budget, there will still be huge cuts to our public services. Those in the community and voluntary sector are often the first to lose out.

Sinn Féin has quite rightly pointed to the DUP, and Arlene Foster in particular, and said, "You need to hold your hands up. You need to be accountable for the RHI fiasco". That is right, but much was made of the so-called brave decision of Sinn Féin to take the finance portfolio, and it has a duty to produce a Budget. The Finance Minister, who should be here to hear this debate, has a responsibility to explain to the people of Northern Ireland why we are heading into an election with the possibility of there being no agreed Budget at the other side in advance of the deadline on 31 March.

Providing services is the fundamental element of government. We would have had a debate in here about the Budget — no doubt, I would have been unhappy with it, as is my wont — but producing a Budget is the minimum that we should expect. Anyone who is derelict in that duty is unfit for government, quite frankly.

I do not like the situation that we are in. I do not like that we are heading for an election. I do not believe that it should have come to this, but I am pleased that the electorate will have the opportunity to give their verdict on these failures. For all the debates and disagreements that we have had in this Chamber, this has been the most startling failure that we have seen.

I will be pleased to offer a positive alternative. The Green Party will be out, as a progressive party, offering our alternative to what we have seen. I will take the opportunity to highlight the waste of the Executive, whether that be the wasted money of the RHI or the wasted opportunity to reform Northern Ireland for the better.

I hate where we have got to. I hate that our people have been failed in such a way. Job losses are inevitable over a political fallout that could and should have been resolved. Arlene Foster should have done the honourable thing and stepped aside, but Máirtín Ó Muilleoir should have presented a Budget to us on 19 December, as had been anticipated. As we know, we are heading into an election, and the electorate will make their judgement on that.

Mr E McCann: Since I came in this morning, I have found that there has been a very strange atmosphere around this place. You would not know what to make of it. Sinn Féin's name has been mentioned all the time, but its Benches are empty, and there is hardly anybody on the DUP Benches. We are talking in a vacuum. This is the way that the Assembly ends: not with a bang but with a whimpering diminuendo of interest as we slink away having achieved absolutely nothing on the big issues that I confront in the interests of the majority of the people.

I came in about an hour ago and discovered —

Mr Agnew: Phillip Logan.

Mr E McCann: Mr Logan. I am terribly sorry, but I forgot his name for a minute. As I came in, there was a ferocious attack coming from Mr Logan on Sinn Féin that took me way back to the 1950s. I can go back that far. There was talk of, "The poisonous nature of these people", and "By God, did you see this tweet that demonstrates that they are out for a united Ireland and nothing less". Now, there is a revelation at the start of 2017. *[Laughter.]* It was old-fashioned stuff. Mr Logan appears to be a lively young man, but he has a doddering old man's head on his shoulders. That, sir, is a biological impossibility and a social and political undesirability, but it is what we have been reduced to by the politics of this place, and that is what I would like to deal with in the couple of minutes left to me.

4.45 pm

We can talk about who is right and who is wrong — I do it as well — on RHI and all the rest of the things, but many of the problems that we are talking about are generated from within the system of governance here in Northern Ireland. They are not entirely to do with the character or the perspectives of particular parties. These contradictions have been built from the beginning. The Executive have collapsed under the weight of their own contradictions. You can analyse it any way you like, but the contradictions were there, and the flaws in the system were not in the edifice of the Executive. The flaws are fundamental; the flaws are in the foundations of the system.

You are invited to believe about our system that you are going to be judged at the polls. We are told this all the time. I am told all the time by some quite sharp and acerbic commentators that the only thing that matters in this country is whether you are green or orange. I heard

somebody shouting from the DUP Benches yesterday — I think that it was Peter Weir — you are green; not a red at all. I do not go back quite this far, but it reminded me of a by-election at the tail end of the 19th century in North Belfast. A fellow stood as a Labour candidate, and the 'Northern Whig' newspaper carried an editorial that said "McGrath is a nationalist no matter what he says or thinks". There is no answer to that.

If you believe that the only measure that you are going to be judged against is how you have served the discrete and specific interest of your particular community, of course there is no dividend in taking up questions to do with a childcare strategy, for example, which we do not have, or a sexual orientation strategy, which we do not have. Those things do not differentially affect one community from the other, and there is no dividend for your tribal chieftains in that sort of thing. Therein lies the connection between the neglect of these issues and all of the suffering that follows from the neglect of these issues, on the one hand, and, on the other, the very structures that have been erected by the Good Friday Agreement.

We in People Before Profit believe that it is possible to talk in class terms in this society and to talk in class terms about things that are normally considered divisive. What is our approach to the murder by British soldiers of Robert Johnston and Robert McKinney? Can we talk about them in the same breath as Bloody Sunday? Mr Johnston and Mr McKinney from the Shankill Road were murdered — murdered — by the Parachute Regiment. Two entirely innocent, decent men, shot down and killed in September 1972, not just by the same regiment but by the same men. I can name them to you. If I have to, I will in this House. I will name the same people who went into Glenfada Park in the Bogside and murdered people. I have approached unionist representatives on the Shankill Road and have said, "Let's get together and work on this. Let's get the truth for those families". I was told to my face, "It would be better if you did not intervene. You will only undermine us. You will associate us with people who are against the army and all the rest of it". There you can see the way in which sectarian mindsets prevent justice from being delivered —

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

Mr E McCann: — even from the people of the community that purportedly are being served by these people.

We will put a class perspective in front of the people. We will advocate a trade union freedom Bill, which we have already drafted. That is the type of thing that should be put before the people if we are going to give young people some hope for the future. As things are going, it is impossible to say that we will weep any bitter tears at the end of this Assembly. My God, we deserve something better, and we will be in the field offering the people something better.

Ms Lockhart: Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak in this debate. I certainly had not planned to, and I do not have anything prepared, but I felt that it was necessary to get up as an elected representative for the Upper Bann constituency. It is a great pleasure to stand here today and to continue to represent the people who put me here.

It is a very sad day for Northern Ireland and a very grave day for Northern Ireland. I sat and listened to the Members in this Chamber echoing and howling and growling about the failures of the Assembly, and I have to say that I believe that that is a reflection on them. Since I was elected, I have, in over 250 days, sought to fight and to deliver for the people of Upper Bann, and that is what I am here to do. If those Members were to take a step back, they would realise that they are there to do that and fight for their constituency.

You tell me and my constituents about failure and the likes of Brownlow, which has been able to achieve over £40,000 or £50,000 in grant funding towards promoting shared education in Lurgan, which has been one of the most polarised towns in this country.

You tell Brownlow that the Executive have failed them and that I have failed them. I do not believe that that is right. Tell the people in Upper Bann who have waited for years to have a Minister of Education who had a heart for the Dickson plan that the Executive have failed them. We had a Minister who listened to the people of Upper Bann and was willing to go out and say, "Do you know what? There is a system that works. Why break it? Why tear it down?". You tell those people that the Executive did not work and that I have failed them. I do not believe that we have.

I can go through a litany of things that I have delivered, such as Millennium Way, new road infrastructure in Lurgan. We waited 40 years for that — 40 years — and this Executive delivered it. I welcome that. You can laugh and scorn, but, to be honest, I do not mind:

laugh away. I am here to represent my people. I have a heart for Upper Bann, and I do not want the institutions to fall, because I believe that they deliver for people on the ground. That is what I am prepared to do; that is what I am elected to do. I can assure you that, going forward, that is what I will stand on. I believe that, as an elected representative, I am their voice and their listening ear. It is vital that I get up every day of the week and represent the people whom I have been elected to represent.

Mr Allen: Will the Member give way?

Ms Lockhart: Absolutely, no problem.

Mr Allen: Like the Member, I got involved in politics to represent and fight for the people of East Belfast and, indeed, all the people of Northern Ireland. Perhaps the Member can tell us this: what do you tell the nearly 40,000 people on the housing waiting list for whom successive DUP Ministers have not delivered? What do you tell people who cannot get a house and have to wait and languish in hostels?

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

Ms Lockhart: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am not saying that we have a perfect world out there. I am not saying that we have adequate resources to service the needs of everyone. I am saying that this was a workable solution, and we thought that it would, over five years, certainly make a change. Unfortunately, there are those who have walked away, and it is they who should answer your question. I am prepared to stand in the House and fight for more social housing. I am prepared to stand and ensure that the number of people on the housing list goes down. That is what I am here to do. That is what I am elected to do, as are you, Mr Allen, and I do not take that away from anyone.

It is a stark day when a party walks away from the electorate. Believe it or not, the needs of their electorate are exactly the same as those of my electorate. That is the harsh reality. As we sit here today, the electorate needs good healthcare, good education and a functioning Executive who deliver for them. Unfortunately, some took the decision to walk away. I trust that people will scratch the surface, look beneath the surface and realise that those who have walked away are to blame for this mess.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for giving way. I have no doubt at all about your passion for the

people whom you represent; that has been evident on multiple occasions in the Chamber. Do you recognise, however, that we are in a very difficult position because of political failures? Yes, Sinn Féin, who are absent today and have been absent on so many issues, are to blame, but do you accept that the DUP plays some part in being responsible for where we are today at this very stark and dark moment?

Ms Lockhart: I thank the Member for her intervention. I commend her because I believe that she is a passionate politician, and I can see that.

I believe that no party or person is above doing something wrong or making a mistake. We all stand here as elected representatives —

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

Ms Lockhart: Certainly. All I can say is that we, as a party, have sought to deliver for the people whom we represent, and, when we go out to our constituents, we will sell that delivery, because that is what has happened.

Mr Allister: It is no surprise to me that mandatory coalition has imploded. It was bound to happen because it is a system incapable of long-term survival. It has imploded because, at its heart, was a party that never really cared whether good government was brought to Northern Ireland or not. Indeed, one of the searching questions that all democrats, and particularly unionists, have to ask themselves now is whether Sinn Féin ever did intend or ever does intend to help make Northern Ireland work or whether Stormont was only ever a phase in its struggle to, in fact, destroy Northern Ireland, to extract what it could and when it could extract no more, to move on in its militaristic terms to the next phase of the struggle. That certainly is my belief. I believe that it is that point that we have reached.

After 10 years of bleeding what it could out of mandatory coalition and having decided that there is nothing more for it unless someone wants to come and load it up with more concessions, it has decided, strategically, that Stormont is over. The only thing that will bring it back here is if the continuance of Stormont so serves its ends because the DUP decides after the election, for the sake of office, to fill Sinn Féin's boots with more concessions. You can have a Stormont under mandatory coalition if you are willing to pay that impossible price. Sinn Féin is testing you to see just how

desperate you are to hang on to power, and if you pay the price again, you will pay it again and again and again.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Wells: Will the Member indicate what concessions the present First Minister has made to Sinn Féin in the last 12 months?

Mr Allister: The DUP made the most colossal concession that we would abandon the fundamental principle of democracy that who is in government lies in the discretion of the people, and that we would bestow that discretion on the parties. That is the essence of mandatory coalition. In any other democracy, the people have the discretion to decide who is in and who is out. They can decide to vote a party out of government; that is in their discretion. However, because of the iniquity of mandatory coalition, that discretion is removed from the voters and is bestowed upon the parties.

Once you create a system that says that you are entitled, as of right, provided that you have a handful of MLAs, to be in government, you transfer the discretion, which is the heart of democracy, as to who should be in government, from people to parties. That is the fundamental flaw of mandatory coalition. When, in the doing of that, you bestow that discretion on a party that does not even want the country of which they are governing to exist or to succeed, it is quite clear, I would have thought, that it is a system bound to implode when it has served its purpose for those prepared to use it and exhaust its credit. That is the point that we have reached, and unless we get to a system of voluntary coalition — government by the willing — we will never have durable, lasting devolution. That reality needs to be faced. If the parties in the House are not mature enough to come to the point of voluntary coalition, we are headed for direct rule.

Mr Beattie: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: In a moment. What needs to happen then is that British Ministers need to take over the Executive, but, this time, direct rule can be made accountable by keeping this House as the lawmaking body so that Westminster's Ministers have to put their laws through this House on devolved issues and are held to account through scrutiny by this House.

5.00 pm

The Assembly has three functions. Two of them have worked reasonably well. One is lawmaking and one is scrutiny. They have worked reasonably well. The one that has been catastrophic is the Executive powers. If the Executive powers are the failure and you cannot agree on voluntary coalition, take them out. Put in British Ministers —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Allister: — and make direct rule accountable to the people by retaining the Assembly for the legislative and scrutiny functions. That is the only way that, I believe, we can make progress. It is quite clear that if we give a veto to Sinn Féin, a party that wants to destroy Northern Ireland, through mandatory coalition, it will do exactly that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Paula Bradshaw to make the winding-up speech on the amendment. You have up to five minutes.

Ms Bradshaw: I rise to support the motion and make the winding-up speech on the amendment. Unfortunately, very few people actually referenced the amendment, which relates to the regional rate. It is totally understandable on a day like today. Yesterday evening, I was in a near-empty Chamber like this when we were discussing collaboration between the Health and Justice Departments on alcohol-related crime. Like today, it was very lamentable that Sinn Féin MLAs absented themselves from that debate. Do Sinn Féin MLAs not think that these issues, like this one today, matter to their constituents? It is shameful that they have decided to walk away.

The motion is very important. I applaud the Opposition parties for bringing it. I think that it would have been far better served if we had debated it four or five months ago, because it was very clear to many of us sitting here on the Back Benches that the wheels were starting to come off the Executive months ago. We can really trace it back to the day after the referendum on Brexit. What we were promised last May when Arlene Foster came into post again as First Minister was that we would have a stable, united Executive. MLAs who are present here, possibly with some exceptions, and the wider public will feel very let down now over the news in the last 24 hours that we are heading for an election.

I will concentrate on the implications for the health sphere of the failure of the Executive to bring forward a Budget. We mentioned it earlier

when the Health Minister came to the House to answer the question for urgent oral answer from my colleague Mrs Dobson on the crisis in the GP sector. We, as the Committee for Health, were very supportive of the Health Minister when she brought forward her "road map", as she calls it, for delivering on health transformation. Within that, very sensible proposals had been brought forward by the Bengoa report. To deliver on them, she required, and said that she had Executive approval for, additional investment. The investment would be to allow for what she called "double-running", which meant that existing services would go on while bringing in new services, innovative practices and the rolling out of best-practice pilots that have been introduced in one trust area into another. Without the Budget and that extra investment, it will be a long time until we see these necessary changes. Again, the Bannview practice is a clear example of why the Minister and the Executive should be up and running to deliver on that as opposed to having this needless election.

In relation to the health and social care sector, we were promised the new Programme for Government and approach around outcomes-based accountability. Coming from the community sector, I was very aware that this stuff was rolling on behind the scenes. Over the last few months, community groups, health charities and voluntary organisations brought together groups of their users, members, boards and board directors to discuss in as much detail as possible their response to the consultation process for the Programme for Government. They, too, should feel very let down today. Where is that Programme for Government now? It is in the gutter. At the far side of the election, it will be very difficult for those groups, such as health charities, to get any enthusiasm up to come forward and bring people together.

Parkinson's UK brought people out of their homes to consult on this. Shame on the Executive for not being able to deliver on the Programme for Government.

My colleague Stephen Farry mentioned the regional rate, so I will not go into that. I will make a final point, however, about a catastrophic failure of the Executive: there is no plan for Brexit. Shame again on the DUP for promoting exit to its electorate. We have no idea of the extent to which we will be disadvantaged by coming out of Europe. We already know that hundreds of millions of pounds of research grants will not come

forward. We are already being excluded from health research trials.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close, please.

Ms Bradshaw: How expensive will it be for the UK to buy into those drugs and new procedures when we are outside Europe?

I commend the amendment to the House and seek the support of those present today — those who bothered to turn up.

Ms Hanna: I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, which has been a retelling of the very sad life story of this failed Government.

Mike Nesbitt opened the debate with a lengthy blooper reel of some of the failings of the DUP and Sinn Féin over the last decade. He spoke about the survivors of institutional abuse — they are here today — and that issue has a lot of resonance with me. It was nine and a half years ago that my mum, who served in the Assembly, brought that motion after campaigning for a number of years. Nine and a half long years elapsed before those victims had the support and redress that they needed. The absent Finance Minister spoke eloquently yesterday about the experiences of some of those people, but he failed to mention that, as well as no Budget being brought forward to give them redress, their case, their cause and their sorrows were not mentioned in the Programme for Government that was being lauded just three weeks ago.

The same goes for equal marriage, an Irish language Act and other issues that are being made election issues but were totally overlooked in the strategic plan that was to set the stage for this mandate. It is disingenuous in the extreme and is part of the packages of spin that are coming out in the dog days of the Executive, such as enhanced rail services for Newry and breastfeeding legislation on which nobody will be here to pass. I am not one for quoting Donald Trump, but I will say that they are "fake news" because they are putting out things that do not exist.

Mr Nesbitt covered many other issues, including the failure to deliver a victims' pension to 400 people who had had their life opportunities taken away from them in the Troubles. We all attend a lot of meetings, and I met that group two or three times. I am mortified to be part of an Assembly that made promises to those people, many of whom are in

the latter years of their life, and has failed to deliver and give them the comfort of a small pension. He also highlighted the irony of one of the DUP's last acts in the Chamber being its petition of concern applied yesterday to the motion on the Speaker, which is characteristic of its approach to accountability.

Stephen Farry highlighted the missed opportunity that we had in the governance of the Assembly. Our view that the trust that was supposed to build up through power-sharing and parties working together in common endeavour — the very ethos of the Good Friday Agreement — has been brushed aside by parties that share power because the law tells them they have to and not because they want to or believe that it is for the advancement of people here. Dr Farry also highlighted the cronyism, deadlock and lack of transparency that have characterised this Government.

Christopher Stalford, with a remarkable grasp of the obvious, pointed out that Northern Ireland is safer now than it used to be. In doing so, he inadvertently highlighted how Ulster Unionists did much of the heavy lifting to create the framework that has brought us to this place. We agree entirely that Sinn Féin shares a lot of blame for the car crash that we are now in, but DUP Member after DUP Member failed to grasp the joint nature of the institutions and the mess they are experiencing now.

Colum Eastwood pointed out one of the most visible signs of failure: the empty Benches to our right. He recounted the hollowness of the Programme for Government and the unwillingness of the DUP and Sinn Féin to engage in its development during the negotiations last May.

He highlighted the hypocrisy of Sinn Féin's simultaneous attack on the Opposition parties for leaving government while they are in the middle of leaving government. He highlights the paucity of the Executive's response to Brexit, because the Fresh Start was the end of history and anything that happened afterwards, including the biggest political and economic crisis that we are going to experience, has to play second fiddle to their selfish squabbles and interests.

Roy Beggs returned to this fundamental issue, which was highlighted today by the plans that Theresa May has received from other devolved Assemblies.

I did not have great expectations about any DUP speeches, but to be compared to Miss Havisham by Pam Cameron really took the

biscuit. Such hubris was on display from DUP Members. By the way, I do not doubt the commitment of the individuals who talked about fighting for their constituents, but they need to understand that the behaviour of their party has taken that opportunity to fight for constituents away from all of us. Talking about protecting, and continuously protecting, the interests of DUP voters entirely misses the point, as the DUP did with Brexit. There are more people out there than just DUP voters. You said that nobody had laid a glove on you politically. We will see whether the electorate wants to lay a glove on you, because the electorate would rather see half a billion pounds in public services than see it go up in smoke.

Sandra Overend raised the failure to resolve the post-primary mess, and that is one of the starkest failures. Ten years of 10- and 11-year-olds have to pay the price for political inertia and for failure to get round to resolve a problem.

Colin McGrath and Jo-Anne Dobson gave magnificent defences of the health service, which has experienced 10 years of strategies that are never followed through and which now faces the winter crisis and the year ahead without a Budget in place.

Steven Agnew reminded us that, no matter how poor the Budget was likely to be — he pointed out that the last few have lacked imagination and fairness — the inability of the Executive even to put before us a Budget, last month and this, demonstrates their complete unfitness for office. The wrong of the Finance Minister's dereliction and the wrong of Arlene Foster's arrogance certainly do not make a right.

Eamonn McCann laid bare the binary world view of the DUP and Sinn Féin and how common goods, like a childcare strategy and a sexual orientation strategy, will always play second fiddle to the efforts that we have seen over the last few years to get one over on each other and one up for their voter base.

Jim Allister questioned whether Sinn Féin was committed to making Northern Ireland work at all.

Paula Bradshaw made an excellent point about the hopes and efforts of voluntary sector groups. Many of them took the time, in the days before Christmas, to respond in good faith to a Programme for Government that will sit on a shelf forever. That will diminish the interest and the possibility of civil society groups, in particular, engaging with future Programmes for Government. I feel that it is part of a war of

attrition by those parties, who know that they can wear down and wreck the heads of moderate centre-ground people and then use dog whistles to get their own voters out at the end. She also raised Alliance's amendment on rates, which we are content to add to the very long list of governance failings.

I will add to that list. To recap, it includes leaving us exposed to the worst aspects of a hard Brexit, led by a Government that have no interest and no understanding of the needs of people in Northern Ireland. It includes failures to bring forward strategies or legislation to advance the rights of ethnic minorities and the LGBT community; it also includes less childcare support than the Conservatives can provide for working families across the water. However, it includes very large bonuses in the NAMA portfolio and fur-lined jobs for paramilitary bosses.

It is sad that half the Executive has not bothered to turn up, but it is clear that this has been 10 years wasted, in which Northern Ireland could have progressed and used to prepare itself to weather the current difficulties in global politics. That opportunity has been wasted by this Executive. Although none of us doubts that we are in a better place than we were during the Troubles — I agree with Mr Stalford on that — it is sad to see that time wasted.

We must all send out the message to a browbeaten public that there are alternatives. If you want the same level of dysfunction, stay at home or vote as you have always voted; but there are opportunities for change.

5.15 pm

Question put, That the amendment be made.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

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

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 34; Noes 29.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Ms Armstrong, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Ms Hanna, Mr Kennedy, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr E McCann, Mr McGrath, Mr McKee,

Mr McNulty, Mr McPhillips, Ms Mallon, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mrs Palmer, Mr Smith, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Bradshaw and Mr Dickson

NOES

Mr Anderson, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Lockhart and Mr Robinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the grave consequences for the people of Northern Ireland of the failure of the Executive to agree a Budget and Estimates for the financial year 2017-18, the failure of the Executive to set a regional rate for 2017-18, the failure of the Executive to endorse a Programme for Government and the continuing failure of the Executive to safeguard the interests of the people of Northern Ireland following the result of the EU referendum.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask Members to take their ease while we move to the next item of business.

5.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Speaker.]

Adjournment

Removal of Loading Bays at Main Street and Bridge Street, Bangor.

Mr Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes to speak.

Ms S Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Out of my continued respect for the House, I would like to place on record my apology for not being in my place at Question Time today.

Mr Easton: This is one of the last Adjournment debates of the current Assembly. I thank the Business Committee and you, Mr Speaker, for agreeing to the debate this evening.

Bangor's three loading bays — one in Bridge Street and two in Main Street — were created as part of the public realm design. The project was delivered by the council in conjunction with the then Department for Social Development. The Department for Infrastructure, as custodian of the public highways, provided the necessary legislation to allow enforcement of the waiting and parking restrictions on the new streetscape, which, in truth, came into force only in October. An answer to an Assembly question claimed that 180 people had been fined over the last 12 months for parking in the loading bays, but the restrictions have not been in force for 12 months. They have been operational only for a four-month period, so the Department needs to give the facts and not distort them in trying to cover up the mess created by the three loading bays and the number of parking tickets that they have generated.

The loading bays outside Menarys were never wanted. Last year, I held a meeting of the council, Transport NI and local businesses, which were complaining that the one-hour waiting times needed to be reinstated because the restrictions were affecting business. They had objected to the loading bays and were held to ransom by Transport NI because of their objection. They were forced to withdraw their complaints about the loading bays in order to get the one-hour waiting time back. That was very unfortunate.

Since the loading bays have come into force, four things have happened: a further seven on-street car parking spaces have been lost, adding to the number lost because of the public realm design and resulting in a further loss of trade to the already struggling traders in Bridge Street and Main Street; it has led to mass confusion among shoppers and drivers, who do not understand why they cannot park in these areas; poor signage has led to further confusion; and the red coats have been queueing up with great zeal, ready to pounce on poor unsuspecting shoppers parking in the loading bays, where they always parked to shop.

In Bridge Street, all parking has been taken away because of the loading bays and the public realm work. All businesses are struggling, and one is considering closing because of the loading bay. It is unfortunate that the Minister could not be bothered to be in his place today to listen to these serious concerns.

So far, £16,000 of fines have been issued — a nice little earner for the Minister's Department. One wonders whether this is the reason why these bays were put in place. Let us look at the facts. Even when these loading bays are empty, lorries and vans are still not using them and are double-parking to deliver their parcels. I have pictures to prove it and I have witnessed it on many occasions. These bays do not even make sense because there are loading bays behind the vast majority of shops and properties on Main Street and Bridge Street. If the Minister were here, I would say, "Minister, this is damaging businesses in Bangor. I can prove it." At an Infrastructure Committee meeting held in Belfast City Hall, I said to the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce representative Mr McElroy:

"You raised the issue of loading bays, which is a big bugbear of mine at the moment. In Bangor, it is causing huge confusion for people who want to park in them. Are you finding that experience here and do you agree that it is affecting trade? I do not know by how much, but it is certainly affecting trade and people being able to get parked in the city centre".

Mr McElroy replied:

"I agree wholeheartedly on all points, as a resident of Bangor and as somebody who carries out business in Belfast ... Our offices are on Great Victoria Street, and we are

now down to having two freely available car parking spaces outside a 10-storey building that houses in the region of 250 people carrying out their business and that is visited by clients. That is largely because of loading bays ... To concentrate specifically on loading bays, the issue is not only the loading bays themselves and the number of them but the times at which they are in force. They are frequently in force at times when there will be no loading to those stores."

If the Minister were here, I would say that I hope that, for once, he would listen because businesses from Main Street and Bridge Street have come together to sign a petition to remove those loading bays. I also understand that the council is now deeply concerned at the impact of those loading bays and that the issue is being raised at council. In response to a recent Assembly question for written answer, the Minister said:

"As with any new arrangement there is a settling in period and my officials will be reviewing all aspects of the Councils scheme over the next few months."

I was going to ask the Minister today for the loading bay fines to be suspended from today, for the loading bays to be reviewed immediately, and for a review to be undertaken with local businesses and the council as a matter of urgency, and for those loading bays to be removed before it is too late for businesses in Bridge Street. I have here the petition that I was going to give to the Minister afterwards but, obviously, the Minister for Infrastructure could not care less about the parking problems in Bangor. He obviously does not care about the businesses that are being affected in Bangor and he obviously does not care about the people of north Down. I have repeatedly asked the Minister to visit north Down to discuss these issues and he has refused. Unfortunately, tonight, we do not have a Minister here at what is a very important debate. He could not care less about trying to resolve these differences by working together with us.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Alan Chambers. The Member has up to 10 minutes.

Mr Chambers: Thank you. The problem of car parking in Bangor and the issues around it have been compounded by the public realm work that has been undertaken in Bangor over the last couple of years.

Because of a reconfiguration of the various car parking spaces, the legislation covering them was set aside at that time and became obsolete. We actually had a period of about a year and a half when there was no legislation in relation to car parking in Main Street, Abbey Street or High Street in Bangor. That meant that you could park your car there. Although there were signs saying that you could park for only one hour and could not come back within an hour, that was not actually the case. People cottoned on very quickly. In fact, disappointingly, some of the people who cottoned on to it were those who were designated as traders. Some of their staff also cottoned on that they could park all day and not get a ticket. I know that this caused tremendous strain on businesses, particularly in Abbey Street and High Street, where the shopkeepers and retailers really did depend on a turnaround to maintain their footfall. They lost that. You could see cars and vans that carry deliveries for some of the businesses in that area parked all day. That was an extremely disappointing situation.

The Department and the Minister had to be hounded to push that legislation through. I sat on the council when the committee that dealt with it pleaded with him to bring the legislation forward. It was about a year after that before he brought it forward. There was a lot of dragging of heels. When they spoke to the council prior to the public realm work, they told us that we would only lose a handful of car parking spaces. I went out in good faith and sold that to people. People were saying, "We will lose a lot of car parking". I said, "No, we will only lose a handful. The Minister and the Department have told us that". The reality was that the town lost 28 car parking spaces. It went down from 162 to 134. Thankfully, the disabled parking spaces remained constant. There were 10, and they retained 10.

One of the things that they did was to introduce these loading bays. I am a motorist who uses Bangor, and I do a lot of business in Bangor daily. One of the infuriating things — all the motorists who use Main Street and High Street in Bangor will identify with this — was the double-parking of lorries. The redcoats totally ignore that and have always ignored it. If you say anything, they tell you that it is not a parking offence but an obstruction offence and that it is a matter for the PSNI. They will not interfere. That causes issues with traffic progression in the town and causes tailbacks of half a mile. The effects of a lorry being double-parked are felt half a mile away in the town, and they do it with impunity.

I have some sympathy with the Minister deciding that these loading bays might be a good idea and introducing them. The reality is that they have been a disaster. They are not being used. In reply to a question from me, he said that they have eliminated six spaces when, in fact, it is seven spaces, not that that is a huge difference. They are not performing the function for which they were placed there. Mr Easton is correct. I have seen it as well. I also have photographs of lorries double-parked adjacent to the loading bay. They are completely ignoring the fact that the loading bays are there. The problem remains that, if we take these loading bays away, we will have to come up with some other method of traffic restriction to remove the scourge of the lorries double-parking in the town. The tragedy is that a lot of these businesses have back entrances and loading bays round the back, and there is no reason why the lorries cannot go round there. It might help if some legislation was brought in so that the redcoats could intervene when lorries double-park and it might help if the lorry drivers started to get parking tickets, although I am sure that they would be the next to ask us to raise a petition if that were to happen.

I know that it is easy to stand up here tonight and say that the Minister should cancel this and take it away from today. The reality is that legislation and laws were passed and put in place and, as we have seen over the last couple of days, you cannot just click your fingers and change the law.

5.45 pm

The legislation that is in place in relation to these loading bays went out to public consultation.

One of the questions that I wanted to ask the Minister — I share my colleague's disappointment that the Minister is not here, although he has been pretty good at Adjournment debates in the past — was whether any of the businesses objected prior to the loading bays going in. I am not sure that there were any objections. There was the planning process as well, and I am not sure that any objections against the bays went through the planning process. Maybe people did not realise the impact or thought that they were a good idea. I am sure that the Minister thought that they were a good idea, but the reality is that they have proved to be a very bad idea.

I asked the Minister whether he had introduced the loading bays with the full approval of the

council. It worked in very close partnership with the Infrastructure Department on the public realm work. I think that there was a bit of playing around with words. The Minister said that the council had carried out all statutory consultations, with the caveat that it was through the planning process and that the council had more or less approved it. I think that the Minister was saying that the council had approved the planning application, as is its statutory duty, as it went through. No doubt the planning committee would have had no reason to turn it down, but the Minister is clutching at that as proof that the council supports the loading bays, and I do not think that that is the reality. If the council was asked the direct question, it would tell you that it was not party to agreeing to the loading bays.

I am sure that a lot of councillors have had their ears bent; certainly, mine have been bent, not by traders but by people who are getting tickets. Even people with blue badges are getting tickets. When they ring me, they are distraught about having to pay the fines. It is a money tree. When I drive down Main Street any day, I see cars parked in it. I say to myself, "Do people not see the signs?" They park, get tickets and do not like it. I do not think that there is an overnight solution, but we have to at least put a marker down — we are doing that tonight — that we do not like the bays. The people, the traders and public representatives do not like them.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Easton for securing the Adjournment debate. I declare at the outset that a close family member unfortunately received a penalty notice for parking in one of the bays.

Just to pick up on Mr Chambers's points, I do not think that this would have entered into public consciousness, even during the formal consultation process. At the best of times, it is difficult to get people to engage. People who are assumed to be most overtly affected tend to respond, but most of the motorists who fall into this category would not have been aware of this. They would have seen a location where they parked previously and assumed that they could continue to park there, without understanding the changes in the rules and regulations. While, technically, we can point to the Highway Code and legislation, I am not sure that average motorists, especially those who passed their test a long time ago, fully understand the subtle differences between one type of parking bay and another or between what is a loading bay and what is not. There is very little indication in the signage, for example, to warn people of the changed circumstances.

That said, I do not think that this is a massive Sinn Féin plot against Bangor or north Down. However, I certainly put on record my disappointment that the Minister is not here to listen to the debate. I am somewhat confused as to what Sinn Féin's position is vis-à-vis the Assembly at this stage. Its Ministers say that they are carrying on with their duties, but, at times, the evidence of that is patchy, to say the least.

This issue shows the difficulties that we have sometimes with large Departments understanding the very subtle circumstances that pertain on the ground in how decisions are implemented and operationalised and their lack of flexibility in acknowledging or responding when things are not perhaps working clearly. That is probably an argument for seeking to consolidate a lot of the very basic powers that exist at local government level, especially when we have the opportunity for joined-up thinking on the knock-on implications of a particular intervention — say, car parking — or other aspects of what is happening in the commercial life of a town. In that regard, I urge Mr Dunne and Mr Easton to encourage their colleague, the outgoing Minister for Communities, to rethink his position on regeneration powers, because the withholding of those from councils is an example of taking things in a direction that was not planned and it makes things more difficult down the line for that direction of travel.

Parking as a whole is at a premium in Bangor town centre, as is undoubtedly the case in many other locations. We have, in effect, a disproportionate impact of the creation of the loading bays, which are not being used for the purpose intended, not least when lorries continue to double-park. Even if they were to be used by lorries for loading, that would be for only a fraction of the day. Otherwise, you have empty space that is not being properly utilised to allow a free-flowing exchange of vehicles, which, in turn, would provide much needed custom for town-centre businesses. We have, in essence, a lack of flexibility and a lack of understanding of local circumstances.

The public realm process, of which that was part, was welcomed by local businesses and other stakeholders. However, I hear comments about it not having brought further regeneration benefits to the town because, for other reasons and factors, that regeneration has not moved to the next step. At the same time, throughout the residential parts of the town — I am sure that this is reflected in other parts of Northern Ireland — there is huge frustration at the state of the pavements, some of which are overgrown with weeds, where paving stones

are still broken, and where there are health and safety hazards. There is frustration because we have had a lot of investment in the town in the look of the street infrastructure, but that has not been matched elsewhere. That has an impact on people's quality of life.

In closing, I encourage, at the very least, Departmental officials, who, hopefully, will read the transcript of today's debate, to reflect on Members' comments. If the decisions are, essentially, operational, perhaps they could action them without the direct input of a Minister. I hope that it is the case that they reflect on what is said. Perhaps they could have a more flexible approach or forgo enforcement, pending some wider discussions about better use, which should take place in conjunction with local representatives, including not just MLAs but the local council.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter. I commend my colleague Alex Easton for raising it this evening. I think that we are all very aware of the public realm work that has been completed, with £8 million of investment through DSD, which is now the Department for Communities, in partnership with Ards and North Down Borough Council. In the main, it has been a success. I know that there are some reservations about it, but it has certainly changed the environment of the town, which was tired and worn and in need of an uplift. The new public realm has made major changes to the town; it has uplifted the environment, which is now much brighter, cleaner and sharper. There are improved footpaths, new pedestrian crossings, new street furniture, and street lights throughout Abbey Street, Main Street, High Street and Bridge Street.

In the main, it has been a success and is something we all welcome. As a former councillor, like a number of Members here, I was involved in that. There was a steering group, which I served on, as did other councillors. On that steering group were trader representatives and community group representatives. TNI was represented, as were DSD and other bodies. Of course, there were consultants; there always have to be consultants getting their fee.

Many people raised the point about the loss of parking bays throughout the town. High Street was always a concern because of the need to park and to increase footfall. There was an argument about Bridge Street; in fact, at one time they were going to make it a one-way street and there was going to be one-way traffic through it. A number of us argued strongly

against that because, as I believed, it would have been a disaster and affected the whole traffic flow in Bangor town centre. That, fortunately, did not happen, but there was always an argument about increasing the open space for the public so that we could have more of a communal feel. Yes, in theory, that sounds good, but, against that, we lost car parking spaces and a lot of the character of the town in relation to accessibility for vehicles.

People in Northern Ireland still like their cars and to drive in close. I am sure that my colleague down there in the corner, Mr Agnew, will agree totally with me that we still like our cars and to drive in as close as possible to our shops, our homes and wherever we are going. It is the culture. I know some will argue that we should change it, but, if we look at Belfast, we see that people do not go there any more. It is positive for towns like Ards and Bangor that people come there to shop. There is all this madness about bus lanes, but they have not worked. There is a balance, and I think the balance with parking bays here is wrong. The need is great for local access for cars and for getting right into town centres.

My colleague made the point that the traders are under pressure. They are, and we are all aware of that. They pay large amounts of rates, and they are in competition with online services and other businesses. Anything that deters people from coming into town is a negative, and this is a major factor. I support what my colleague Alec Easton said about the vehicle bays. The vehicle bays were argued against, but we, as elected representatives, were not listened to. We have a loss of approximately seven car parking spaces with the vehicle bays. They are in prime areas adjacent to the major shops, which are trying to survive and compete with other businesses.

I urge the Department, which is now Transport NI, to review the work that has been carried out. I think that is important, and I urge it to continue to carry out the important maintenance work throughout the North Down area. We have a lot of outstanding work on the A2; we debated that some months ago. We really get a poor maintenance service from Transport NI throughout the North Down area. We want to see future investment and see the area improving, making it one of the best parts of North Down for people to live, work and enjoy themselves in.

Mr Agnew: I will start by inviting Mr Dunne to acknowledge that, in North Down, we love our trains. We have an award-winning train station in Bangor, and, indeed, the train brings in much

tourism — some of it unwanted, admittedly, at times. However, it is highly valued in North Down and our town centres.

I appreciate Alex Easton bringing forward the issue. As a resident who lives on the edge of the town centre, I know that double-parking by delivery lorries is the bane of any driver's existence when trying to get through the town centre. It is infuriating, but, as has been highlighted here today, the problem has not been alleviated by the loading bays.

We have a wider issue with parking in general in North Down. The loading bay issue is particularly frustrating for those who have fallen foul of the fines. Whether we have them or not, our parking problems in Bangor will not be completely alleviated either way. Six or seven extra spaces would undoubtedly help, but we need the wider issue resolved. It is worth making that point, because, as the Queen's Parade project continues, there is an opportunity to look at parking in general in the town centre and bring about a long-term solution. In the short term, it is certainly something that can be fixed more quickly than Queen's Parade — if, indeed, the Queen's Parade issue is ever resolved. I hope and believe that it will be. It is a question of "when" rather than "if".

We need to look at a strategic approach to parking in Bangor. We need to look at the transition to more low-carbon forms of transport. Our trains have been a great success, but there has been less success in getting people to shift on to buses where the train line does not run.

As I said, I appreciate the proposal this evening. It is regrettable that the Minister is not here to hear it, but I hope that his officials are listening on his behalf. It is something that needs to be relooked at. The introduction of loading bays was a well-intentioned move to assuage people like me who are frustrated by the double-parking, but it has not solved the issue, and we need a different solution.

Adjourned at 6.02 pm.

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