



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 17 September 2024

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At yesterday's sitting, during the Matter of the Day on Casement Park, Mr Phillip Brett said:

*"It was not a DUP Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister who was forced before the then Committee for trying to bury a report that related to safety concerns." — [Official Report (Hansard), 16 September 2024, p4, cols 1-2]*

I invited the British Cabinet Office to investigate those allegations, which were proven to be incorrect. I want that on the record. Like other Members, I am well attuned to the cut and thrust of politics, but I believe that that went well below what was acceptable, and I want that to be recorded in Hansard.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has put that on the record very clearly. That should be a conclusion to the matter.

## Members' Statements

**Mr Speaker:** The usual rules apply.

### St Ergnat's GAC Moneyglass

**Mr Kearney:** I congratulate St Ergnat's GAC Moneyglass on the opening of its new pitch and facilities at Loughbeg Road on Sunday. Céim stairiúil chun tosaigh a bhí ann. *[Translation: It was a historic step forward.]* The club has been at the heart of Moneyglass for 75 years. Tá sé go hiomlán fite fuaite le saol an phobail áitiúil. *[Translation: It is completely interwoven with the life of the local community.]* It is integral to the social fabric of the Moneyglass community. The new pitch and facilities at Loughbeg Road are the culmination of many years of diligent planning, hard work and extensive fundraising by the club and all its members right across the nine counties of Ulster and further afield. It was a personal joy to see how much pride older members of the club as well as younger members had on that occasion. It was a wonderful event.

Moneyglass GAC is an exemplary model of community volunteerism, the ethos of the GAA. Is é sin bunchloch Chumann Lúthchleas Gael fud fad na hÉireann. *[Translation: That is the cornerstone of the Gaelic Athletic Association throughout Ireland.]* It is, indeed, the foundation of everything that is best and good about the GAA and for the future.

The pitch and projected facilities, which will flow from Sunday's opening, will secure the future for generations of young Moneyglass Gaels. Guím gach rath leis an chlub. *[Translation: I wish the club every success.]* I wish Moneyglass GAC all the best of luck that it deserves for the future and the next 75 years to come.

### Roads: South Down

**Ms Forsythe:** I am frustrated to, once again in the Chamber, bring attention to the state of the

roads in South Down. The matter is raised with me every day. We are not proud in any way to have some of the worst roads in Northern Ireland, and they have been for some time. Last year's floods caused complete devastation to parts of our roads. The fact that, almost 11 months on, we still have two unrepaired major road collapses from the floods, with no communication to users about when they will be fixed, is a disgrace. The A2 Shore Road at Rostrevor and the Kilkeel Road out of Hilltown are both busy, main through roads that operate with significant traffic. Under traffic management, they remain reduced to one lane, and that causes huge disruption daily to locals and businesses, and it has put off tourists throughout the summer.

Our road surfaces are also a disgrace. The entire main road from Kilkeel to Newcastle needs to be resurfaced. I welcome that a small portion is going to be resurfaced, starting this week, but we need much more. I am inundated with constituents asking why the roads cannot be resurfaced. Why have the damaged roads not been fixed? Why are the people in South Down being left behind? I am as frustrated as they are. I travel on those roads every day as well. We need urgent attention to fix our damaged roads and resurface our major through routes. We deserve it. The people of South Down deserve better than the roads that they have. They pay their taxes like everyone else, and they do not deserve to be left behind.

## Anti-poverty Strategy

**Ms Mulholland:** Today, on International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, I want to address the desperate lack of an anti-poverty strategy in Northern Ireland.

Despite the urgent need, we still have no clear plan to tackle poverty, especially child poverty. I am tired of hearing vague promises, such as, "We are progressing at pace", or "Actively considering the development and delivery of the strategy". They are just words on a page. For us, it is about real people who are struggling to make ends meet, children who are going to school hungry and families who are living with anxiety because of poverty. Our failure to prioritise a comprehensive poverty strategy in the Programme for Government sends a devastating message to the 24% of children and 18% of working-age adults who currently live in relative poverty.

The absence of a dedicated anti-poverty strategy is a glaring failure to address the needs of those who need our support most. The

previous child poverty strategy ended in May 2022, and, since then, we have seen a significant rise in child poverty. In 2022-23, 24% of children lived in relative poverty, and that was up from 18% the year before. Those are not just numbers; they represent thousands of children in our communities who are going without the basic necessities of life. The Northern Ireland Audit Office's report on child poverty highlighted that the annual cost is estimated to be between £825 million and £1 billion per year.

It is not just a financial burden; it is a human crisis. Children who live in poverty are four times more likely to develop mental health issues by the age of 11, setting them up for a lifetime of disadvantage. Without a strategy in place, we are failing our children, and the consequences will only snowball as they grow older. We need to ask ourselves this: what will it cost to do nothing? That should be at the forefront, underpinning every policy decision that we make.

One of the most urgent issues driving poverty in our community is the five-week wait for universal credit. It is not just a bureaucratic hiccup; it actively pushes people deeper into hardship. Imagine losing your job, leaving a difficult or abusive relationship or becoming unwell, only to hear that you have to wait more than a month for any financial support. The wait is devastating, and it forces people into debt, leaves them dependent on food banks and even drives some into the hands of paramilitaries for loans. It is more than a delay: it is a flawed design that throws families into crisis.

The challenges keep coming. In six months, the welfare mitigations that so many rely on, such as the benefit cap, are set to end, leaving families exposed to the harshest realities of welfare reforms.

Without those protections, many families will face drastic cuts to their income. I want the Executive and the Department for Communities to act decisively now. We urgently need a comprehensive and multidimensional poverty strategy that prioritises our children, supports our working families and commits to reducing the staggering human and financial costs of poverty in Northern Ireland.

## Mid South West Growth Deal

**Mr Gildernew:** I want to make a Member's statement on the deplorable and unacceptable

announcement on the city deals that was made late last week — Friday night, actually.

For context and because not all Members will know, the Mid South West region is a collaboration between Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Mid Ulster District Council. The package that was being worked on and has been worked on very diligently by many people in those areas comprises a funding commitment of £252 million from the Executive and the British Government. To give context, the terms of agreement for that deal were to be signed in October; the invites were being prepared. All of that work was in place.

The Mid South West region has 12 project proposals that have the potential to deliver additional jobs; drive growth in output and wages; increase visitor numbers and spend; and provide a population magnet, as further people are attracted to come to the region. Those economic benefits will be quantified in the process. In order to drive our public services, we clearly need to improve our economies. This is a central part of that process and must be considered in that context. The areas being looked at were enabling infrastructure, regeneration and tourism; boosting innovation; and digital capacity. The projects included robotics, automated packaging, an agro-bio innovation centre, a green energy district, innovation programmes and a huge industrial capacity around Desertcreat and Cookstown.

To give further context, the Mid South West region makes up half of the land area of the North and is home to 26% of our population and 35% of our businesses. That is the scale of what we are talking about. It is also the longest border region by far, with 499 kilometres of the border corridor included in the area.

Figures regarding gross disposable income show that we are 3% behind the average. That is an issue of huge concern. I want Members to consider the impact that the city and growth deal would have in a region that provides a huge economic engine for the entire area. We are proud of our engineering and manufacturing sector; it is world-leading. Our district is always looking for new opportunities, and people have been working diligently and assiduously to make that happen. It must happen. I know that the Finance Minister is working to address the issues, and I wish her every success in those efforts.

## Road Safety

**Mr Dunne:** I rise today to highlight the important issue of road safety and the tragedies unfolding on our roads all too often. A total of 71 people lost their lives on our roads last year — the highest annual number of deaths for eight years. That is truly shocking. Sadly, 41 people have already lost their lives on our roads this year. Meanwhile, PSNI figures also show that 880 people were seriously injured on our roads in the same year. What those stats do not begin to represent is the immense pain and suffering behind each number. Whether it be the loss of a dear friend or family member or the permanent mental or physical trauma from a serious road traffic collision, each death and serious injury on our roads causes incredible harm and heartbreak across our communities and every part of Northern Ireland.

The Department for Infrastructure has launched its road safety strategy to 2030, alongside an action plan for 2024-25. The strategy sets ambitious targets to reduce those numbers by at least 50% by 2030. I very much welcome that strategy — we have talked about it a number of times at the Infrastructure Committee — and the action plan and the important targets contained in it for safer roads, safer vehicles and safer people. That is something that we can all get behind today.

We need much more than just another strategy. It is important that every effort is made to ensure that the targets are met.

It is disappointing that a number of key targets from the previous action plan were not met, particularly those on mobile phone legislation and the important review of drink-driving legislation.

### 10.45 am

The statistics show that, between 2018 and 2022, 377 people were killed or seriously injured on our roads as a result of drink or drugs having been taken. It is vital that the Department for Infrastructure, the Department of Justice and the PSNI take a collaborative approach to discouraging and punishing those very dangerous and destructive practices, given the severe impact that they are having on road safety.

Another key aspect of the road safety strategy centres on safe roads, which ties in well with what my colleague from South Down has already said about how our road network must be improved. Real investment in it is needed in order to promote road safety and prevent

unnecessary collisions. Unfortunately, many roads across the country have been neglected by the Department for Infrastructure, particularly in recent years. One prominent example in my constituency of North Down is the A2 dual carriageway between Bangor and Belfast, which carries over 35,000 vehicles every day. That is an example of a road with the potential for accident black spots. The Minister for Infrastructure has committed to holding a road safety review of the A2, and I implore him to continue down that path and to ensure that action is taken. It is therefore important that we highlight the issue, and we all have a responsibility under the Share the Road to Zero programme.

## Open Botanic

**Mr O'Toole:** Last week, I paid tribute to a wonderful community event in South Belfast, and I am delighted to say that I am able to do so again. This past weekend, on Sunday, there was an event on Botanic Avenue — just around the corner from my constituency office — called Open Botanic. Just over a month ago, we saw horrible, appalling and shaming scenes on Botanic Avenue and in that part of inner South Belfast. Those scenes do not represent the people of South Belfast, nor do they represent any of the communities that call South Belfast home. On Sunday past, however, we saw South Belfast's true diversity.

Botanic Avenue was closed to traffic, and it was, amazingly, another gloriously sunny day, just as we had had for the events in Ormeau Park and in Finaghy a week or two before. On Botanic Avenue, we witnessed a huge range of diversity. We saw the Anaka Women's Collective, samba bands and flamenco bands. We also saw flute bands. The Pride of Lagan Valley and the Finaghy True Blues were there representing the Belfast Bands Forum. We had Friends of the Field, which does wonderful conservation work beside Botanic Gardens. The event really gave a beautiful and inspiring insight into the diversity of South Belfast and how the plurality of the constituency and place works so well together.

It was a glorious, cross-community, family day. It was diverse, and, yes, it was sunny. There was great food on offer and great experiences to be had. That is so important to me, because I am very proud to represent the constituency. I am also proud to live in the community and to work just around the corner on University Street. Walking down Botanic Avenue on Sunday, I nearly had to put on sun cream. It was not quite as sunny as it had been in

Ormeau Park the week before, but it reminded me of the wonderful, shared community that is South Belfast. As I said, we had the Belfast Bands Forum there, the Anaka Women's Collective and representatives from right across the community. It was an inspiring and wonderful day and a reminder of what is the best of South Belfast and, indeed, the best of Belfast as a city.

## Gerry McLaughlin

**Mr Bradley:** I will speak about the sad loss of a friend and former council colleague, Gerry McLaughlin, who was laid to rest on Friday. The nature of this place and the short time available in which to organise meetings and deal with constituency matters greatly impinges on our ability to attend funerals and ad hoc events. Nevertheless, I record my sadness at his passing and my gratitude for having known Gerry for many years, long before he or I became councillors.

Gerry McLaughlin is etched in my good-memories bank. I knew Gerry when he worked in Diamond sawmills and in the old Department of the Environment, long before I became a councillor. In fact, Gerry was the first person to shake my hand on the day that I was elected in a by-election. He had a reputation for helping his fellow workmates, while his record of working for all as a councillor was well known and appreciated.

He was a tireless community worker. In his younger days, he was a leading member of Windsor Boys' Club in Coleraine, where he educated children in the art of boxing alongside the late Billy Murphy and the late John Harte. His love for his wife, Bernadette, and his family was unending. Bernadette was a shining star in his life, closely followed by his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I was privileged to play a small part when he and Bernadette renewed their marriage vows on their 50th wedding anniversary.

Gerry's late father served in the First World War and was severely injured, but, thankfully, he survived that terrible conflict and returned home. Gerry, in memory of his father, was one of the first, if not the very first, SDLP councillors to attend Remembrance Sunday. When he and I attended our first official Remembrance Sunday together in 1996, we also travelled to the Somme battlefields.

Gerry McLaughlin was a kind, loving, loyal man whose word was his bond, and his integrity was beyond reproach. He was a gentleman, a family

man. He had so many qualities, and I was proud to have known him as a friend. I have fond memories of our times in council. As two working-class guys, we had much in common and a friendship that rose above all else, especially politics. A few months back, Gerry and his daughter Stephanie visited my office. Right away, Gerry, despite his illness, adopted a boxing pose. We had a good laugh, a bit of craic, and, again, another memory was made that will never fade.

Gerry will be greatly missed, not by just his family but by the many constituents whom he helped over the years. I, too, will miss Gerry. My life has been much richer for having known him, and I extend my deepest sympathy to his wife, Bernadette, children Donna, Cathy, Gerry, Colette, Dominic, Gemma, Stephanie, Gary, Richard, Amy and the late Louise and the immediate and extended family circle.

## Strangford Ferry Suspension

**Ms Armstrong:** I rise today with a concern, which is that the Minister for Infrastructure and the Department for Infrastructure have announced that the Strangford ferry crossing will cease for five weeks from 14 October. That will have a huge impact on the Strangford constituency, particularly those in the Upper Ards who use that ferry daily to get to work and access hospital services and, particularly now that children are back at school, the hundreds of children who cross every day to access schools in Downpatrick or Ballynahinch.

The fact that there was no formal announcement of the suspension other than an appearance on TrafficWatchNI and on social media yesterday is astounding. I would have thought that something as devastating as having a ferry removed for five weeks would have called for a meeting with local representatives or the local community. When I spoke to Members and business owners in the local community yesterday evening, they confirmed that they did not know about it either.

It is time for the Minister for Infrastructure to clarify what the impact will be on the community around the Ards peninsula and Strangford of the removal of the ferry for such a significant period. I understand that the reason for its being off for five weeks is to do with health and safety repairs required at the quays. I am not sure whether that is at Strangford, Portaferry or both, but it would have been nice to know in advance. Significant work has been done on the roads around the peninsula, including the dangerous A20, and I am grateful for that, but it

all seems to be happening at once, and there will be a negative impact on businesses either side of the lough.

I ask that the Minister for Infrastructure perhaps meet me and my colleagues from the Strangford constituency to discuss this. Translink has an opportunity here: while a passenger ferry will be provided, albeit a limited service, a connection could be provided on the Strangford side. A bus for workers who usually take their cars would enable them to travel to work in Downpatrick. Had we had the opportunity to meet the Minister or officials in advance, we could have arranged all that and taken the sting out of the news that the ferry will be taken off for five weeks.

The peninsula can feel like an isolated place. The announcement yesterday has made it even more isolated. It is a shame that this type of information cannot be shared more clearly with the public and elected Members before decisions are taken.

## Early Childhood Development

**Mr Martin:** The first 1,000 days of life from conception to the age of two are a critical phase. That has been widely recognised by clinicians, psychologists and researchers. During that period, crucial foundations are laid for a child's development. If a child's body and brain develop positively, their life chances are considerably improved. However, exposure to stress or adversity during that phase can result in a child's development faltering and, in some cases, falling significantly behind that of their peers. Left unaddressed, adverse childhood experiences — more commonly known as "ACEs" — can stay with children throughout their lives and can even be passed on to future generations.

Intervening more proactively in the first thousand days of a child's life can improve a child's health, emotional development and life chances, and, more importantly, it is just the right thing to do. Excellent work has been carried out in that area by WAVE Trust and others over the past 10 years. Sure Start centres across Northern Ireland are crucial in that regard, and I pay tribute to the one that operates in my constituency of North Down. I also recognise the excellent work that Kilcooley Women's Centre and North Down Community Network do alongside young mums in the Bangor area.

Positive interventions that are put in place during the first thousand days are classed by



economists as invest-to-save initiatives. In other words, whilst clearly needing funding at the outset, those initiatives can prevent the need for more expensive interventions later in a child's life. I especially welcome the Education Minister's announcement in May this year that there will be an additional £25 million for early learning and childcare in Northern Ireland. That is exactly the sort of invest-to-save measure that I am talking about.

This is primarily a Health Department issue, as that Department has the legal vires for this stage of a child's development and life. Therefore, I strongly encourage the Health Minister to look again at the area and prioritise spending accordingly, as I believe that it will reap benefits in the long run. In my view, special attention needs to be paid to the numbers and frequency of midwife and health visitor supports. I hope that that type of initiative commands the support of the entire House.

## Football: Jonny Evans

**Mr Brett:** As a proud son of north Belfast, a Manchester United fan and a Northern Ireland fan, it gives me great pleasure to pay tribute to our retiring captain, Jonny Evans. Unfortunately for me, that is where the comparisons between me and Mr Evans end. Jonny played for Northern Ireland on 107 occasions, captaining the team since the retirement of Steven Davis. Jonathan made his debut for Northern Ireland in 2006 against Spain, as that famous song goes — Mr Speaker, you will know the result of that match — when Northern Ireland claimed an historic 3-2 victory.

Despite Jonathan winning the Champions League and Premier League with Manchester United, on his retirement, he said that his proudest achievement in football was wearing the green shirt of Northern Ireland and representing his country. For me, that is what the Northern Ireland football team is all about. It brings people from all backgrounds and all traditions together under the unity of that badge, playing for and hoping to get the best result for our country.

Jonathan never forgot his working-class roots in Newtownabbey. He never forgot those who helped him in his teenage years, and the fans will never forget him. Jonathan showed that, regardless of what part of Northern Ireland you come from — he came from one of the most socio-economically challenged constituencies in Northern Ireland and one of the most difficult wards — you can proudly represent your country. He should be an inspiration to any boy

or girl anywhere in Northern Ireland and show that you can proudly wear the shirt of your country and that the whole of Northern Ireland will always be behind you.

## Ravara Pipe Band

**Miss McIlveen:** I congratulate Ravara Pipe Band on its success at the World Pipe Band Championships in Scotland last month. The band returned home from Glasgow as the 2024 grade 2 world champions.

Ravara Pipe Band has a long record of success locally, and it is fantastic to see its incredible achievement on the world stage more recently. This summer alone, Ravara Pipe Band won in the respective grade 2 categories at the Heart O'Down Pipe Band Championships; the Ulster Pipe Band and Drum Major Championships; the All-Ireland Band and Drum Corps Championships; the Mid Ulster Pipe Band and Drum Major Championships; the UK Pipe Band Championships for the third year in a row; and the World Pipe Band Championships in Glasgow Green. The recent win in Glasgow also means that the band finished the year as the grade 2 supreme champion of champions band in both Scotland and Northern Ireland. I give a special mention to Ravara's drum major, Jamie Cupples, who came second in the adult drum major final at the recent World Pipe Band Championships in Scotland, adding to the remarkable list of prizes from this season.

The extent of Ravara's success this summer is nothing short of phenomenal. I put on record my congratulations and express on behalf of the wider community in my home village of Ballygowan how proud we all are to say that we officially have the best grade 2 pipe band in the world.

11.00 am

## Pro-Palestine Activists

**Mr Carroll:** I commend the recent work of pro-Palestine activists across the country who have taken action to say that we should not normalise apartheid and genocide. In recent days, that action was targeted on the US company Red Hat, which has strong connections with the Israeli military and the Israeli occupation. Despite all the attempts on this island and across the world to mischaracterise the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement, the actions with regard to Red Hat show what the movement is all about: at its heart, it is a peace, justice and solidarity movement.

In the face of GAA upper management wanting to put their heads in the sand in the hope that they could get away with hosting that company, activists, importantly, got organised online and out in the street outside places like Casement Park in my constituency. I commend the activists in the Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign (IPSC), Gaels Against Genocide and every individual and organisation who came out to take a stand against the company. There must not and cannot be business as usual for companies that profit while they are connected to the Israeli war machine, with its ongoing killing and slaughter.

More important than ever, we need to keep up our activism as we approach a year of the genocide and scholasticide. Despite the brutality of the war launched by Israel and, as reported by 'The Lancet', the estimated 186,000 people killed, Palestinians will not disappear. The Zionist project is fracturing as the myth of Israel being a liberal democracy has been exposed as a lie in front of the whole world.

UN special rapporteur Francesca Albanese rightly said:

*"It is unavoidable for Israel to become a pariah".*

Our job in Ireland is to say that loud and clear and to expose the true nature of the apartheid state and its war machine. My message to the activists is this: keep being active, keep marching and keep protesting until Palestine is free.

## Ministerial Statement

### North/South Ministerial Council: Languages

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister for Communities that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that questions should be concise. This is not an opportunity for long introductions.

**Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities):** Mr Speaker, with your permission and in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Language Body meeting that was held at the NSMC joint secretariat offices on 29 May. The Executive were represented by me, as Minister for Communities, and by junior Minister Reilly, as accompanying Minister. The Irish Government were represented by Thomas Byrne TD, Minister of State with responsibility for the Gaeltacht. The statement has been agreed with Minister Reilly, and I make it on behalf of both of us.

The meeting dealt with issues relating to the North/South Language Body and its two constituent agencies: the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge. A number of topics were discussed, with decisions being taken where appropriate. As part of the opening remarks, Ministers acknowledged the work of the language body and the positive impact that the agencies have had in the language and culture sectors on both sides of the border. Following the opening remarks, I, as chair, introduced a number of items that form the basis of this statement.

The first item discussed was the language body progress report. The Council noted the progress reports for the period 2020-23, which were received from the chairs and CEOs of the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge, along with the key achievements of the language body since the last sectoral meeting. Those achievements included the forging of Ulster-Scots links with the international diaspora through the Ulster-Scots Agency welcoming over 3,000 people to view the Declaration of Independence exhibition at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), which featured an original Dunlap broadside; the distribution by the Ulster-Scots Agency of more than 900 funding grants to help with COVID safety and mitigate the financial impact of the pandemic; the continuing work of

Foras na Gaeilge, in partnership with its lead organisations, to deliver language planning initiatives in both jurisdictions, including in Gaeltacht service towns and Irish language networks; and the considerable progress in dictionary and terminology work, including the launch of Foras na Gaeilge's new dictionary project in 2022 with the ambitious target of publishing a single-language Irish dictionary and a new Irish-English dictionary online by 2027.

The second item to be addressed was corporate governance. The Council addressed a number of governance issues, including the approval of the language body business plans and budgets for 2022, 2023 and 2024, which were completed in accordance with guidance issued by both Finance Departments and agreed by the sponsor Departments and Finance Ministers. Ministers also approved the language body corporate plans for 2023 to 2025, which, again, were completed in accordance with the guidance issued by both Finance Departments and agreed by the sponsor Departments and Finance Ministers. The Council noted the language body's consolidated annual report and accounts for 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021, which had been certified by the Comptrollers and Auditors General and laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The NSMC also noted that the audit of the 2022 accounts is near completion.

The next item to be addressed was climate change and loss of biodiversity in the language sector. The NSMC noted that, as public service bodies, both agencies of the North/South Ministerial Council language body have statutory climate change and biodiversity obligations. Ministers welcomed the agencies' drafting of climate action road maps to meet the targets in both jurisdictions. We noted that both agencies will continue to engage with relevant Departments in order to identify opportunities to address climate change and loss of biodiversity from an operational perspective.

The NSMC then received presentations by groups that the language body funds. The presentations by Gael Linn and the Ulster-Scots Community Network illustrated the key achievements of the organisations as a result of working in partnership with agencies of the language body. The Council welcomed the successful engagement with schools in both jurisdictions to deliver programmes and schemes to improve Irish language skills and to create natural opportunities to speak Irish outside the formal classroom setting. The North/South Ministerial Council also welcomed

raising awareness of Ulster-Scots identity among individuals and over 100 voluntary and community groups. That included the provision of policy support, assistance with adherence to safeguarding standards and the encouragement of wider involvement in Ulster-Scots activity by groups and individuals through the delivery of over 30 cultural events in 2023.

The final issue that was addressed was the date of the next NSMC language body meeting, with the Council agreeing to hold it in autumn 2024.

**Mr McGlone:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an ráitis. An bhfuil aon dul chun cinn á dhéanamh i dtaobh reachtaíocht teanga, agus an bhfuil aon chomhoibriú á dhéanamh idir an dá Rialtas le sin a bhaint amach? *[Translation: I thank the Minister for his statement. Is any progress being made on language legislation, and is there cooperation between both Governments to achieve that?]*

**Mr Lyons:** No. That was not raised at the meeting, because it is a responsibility solely for the Department. I am considering next steps in the development of the relevant strategies.

**Mr Gildernew:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. *[Translation: I thank the Minister for his statement.]* I also thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber. Minister, will you outline the steps that you are taking to address the vacancies in Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency?

**Mr Lyons:** There are a number of vacancies. The Executive will need to work through the appointments. They are considering appropriate nominees. Once I have those, I will seek NSMC agreement to make the appointments at the earliest opportunity.

**Mr Kingston:** When will the chair of the Ulster-Scots Agency be appointed?

**Mr Lyons:** The Member will be aware that that vacancy has existed for some time. As I said in my answer to Mr Gildernew, there are a number of Executive-nominated vacancies on the language body boards. It will be up to the Executive to decide those, and I will then be able to take them to the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. Unfortunately, because it is dependent on Executive agreement, I do not have a time frame for when that appointment will be made.

**Ms Armstrong:** Thank you for your statement, Minister. During your conversations, was there

any consideration of the standardisation of Irish and Ulster Scots? I know that there has been talk about a dictionary. The wealth and the generosity of language come from the variations. We know that "thran" in Ulster Scots means something very different in different parts of the country. What input, therefore, have native speakers?

**Mr Lyons:** That was not discussed at the meeting. The language bodies are responsible for bringing forward what it is that they would like to see happen. If the Member has individual issues that she would like to see one of the agencies take forward, I would be more than happy to pass that on to the relevant agency and see what, if anything, needs to be discussed at further meetings.

**Ms Ferguson:** I thank the Minister for his update on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in May. What engagement does he have planned with the Irish language and Ulster-Scots communities ahead of the next North/South Ministerial Council meeting in the autumn?

**Mr Lyons:** I will need to check my diary. Obviously, there is regular, ongoing engagement with those bodies at official level and at ministerial level. I will need to check and see what is coming up in my diary.

It is certainly right that we have close cooperation. There will be greater collaboration with the Ulster-Scots Agency as a result of the United States/Northern Ireland cultural working group, of which it is a part. We also meet the agencies of the language body in other forums, if not directly at meetings.

**Ms Mulholland:** My question is on the collaboration with the Ulster-Scots Agency around the cultural piece. Will the Minister give us a wee bit more detail about what was discussed and what initiatives are planned going forward?

**Mr Lyons:** I raised that at yesterday's plenary meeting as well as at the sectoral meeting. I believe that there is huge opportunity, as I said in the Chamber yesterday, to develop those links, particularly with the United States, which I mentioned. There are number of ways in which I can do that. Again, if the Member has any particular issues that, she thinks, the working group should look at, I would be happy to engage with her on that.

**Mr McHugh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis fosta. *[Translation: I, too, thank the*

*Minister for his statement.]* Minister, will you outline what the language planning initiatives are, including the Gaeltacht service towns?

**Mr Lyons:** Although I do not have the detail on that, as it is the responsibility of the body, I will be happy to ask it to provide an update to the Member.

**Ms Bradshaw:** This follows on from my colleague Sian Mulholland's question. In the summer, I had the great fortune of visiting the Ulster-Scots Agency and hearing about the exhibition at PRONI. Was the 250th anniversary of the signing of the US Declaration of Independence discussed, and is the tourism potential of that something that your Department could take forward with its Irish counterpart?

**Mr Lyons:** Issues of tourism are primarily under the purview of the Department for the Economy. However, I absolutely want to make sure that I play whatever role I can in that. We have an opportunity to promote Northern Ireland in the United States through the cultural connections that we have. The exhibition on the Declaration of Independence was very useful. I am pleased to be able to tell the House that I have made progress in our conversations with both the Smithsonian Institution in the United States and the National Archives about how there can be greater collaboration with National Museums NI and the Public Record Office. I would like to develop that. Ultimately, one of the best outcomes we can get from that is raising awareness among more people in the United States, especially those with an Ulster-Scots background, of what it is that we do here in Northern Ireland and, hopefully, getting them over to visit.

**Mr Gaston:** Thank you very much, Minister. Later today, the Assembly will debate pressures on the health service, yet, in your statement to the House, you said that, in May 2024, the Council approved the North/South language body business plans and budgets for 2022, 2023 and 2024 and that the audited accounts for 2022, which was two years ago, are near completion.

No business could operate in that fashion. Why is it thought to be acceptable when it comes to the sacred cows of the North/South bodies? What are you doing to ensure that that issue does not arise again?

**11.15 am**

**Mr Lyons:** The Member will be aware that, when the Assembly and Executive were not in place, there were no meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council at sectoral, institutional or plenary level in order to allow those to go through their proper processes. If the Member has any particular concerns on those, I will be happy to hear them. I will take them up directly with whomever is responsible.

**Mr Carroll:** Thank you, Minister. Was there any discussion about expanding the Gaeltacht bursary scheme, especially given the budget surplus in the South and the Apple billions that are likely to come through? It is an important scheme, but I am concerned that, with the rapid increase in the number of Gaeilgeoirí [*Translation: Irish speakers*], particularly in working-class communities, many people in my constituency and beyond will be denied the undeniable benefits of immersive learning that a Gaeltacht course and visit provide.

**Mr Lyons:** That issue was not discussed during the meeting. The Member will be aware that, in Northern Ireland, we have many public-sector organisations that are facing into real-term budget reductions, with rising costs and standstill budgets. If there were to be a proposal from the Irish Government to increase their budget, that would then have implications for us. We need to ensure that the funding level is kept the same. It would have been difficult for us to increase that funding if the Irish Government had wanted to, because we need to be aware of the budgetary situation in which we find ourselves.

**Mr O'Toole:** Minister, in your answer to my colleague Patsy McGlone, you said that the language Act had not come up in discussion, but, obviously, when the Irish language and Ulster-Scots commissioners are appointed, they will have to work on a cross-border basis because the languages and sectoral bodies are cross-border. Please, can you give us an update as to when those commissioners will be appointed? We have been talking about this for years now. When will they be appointed?

**Mr Lyons:** The commissioners are not my Department's responsibility. I will need to consider the strategies and action plans, consider the next steps and engage with Executive colleagues. Only when we get to that position will I be able to bring forward a timetable.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes questions on the statement.

## Executive Committee Business

### Justice Bill: First Stage

**Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice):** I beg to introduce the Justice Bill [NIA 07/22-27], which is a Bill to amend the law about the retention and destruction of fingerprints and DNA profiles under Part 6 of the Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989; to amend the law about the release of children on bail and about their detention; to permit the use of live links for the exercise of certain police functions; to make other provision in connection with the administration of justice; and for connected purposes.

*Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.*

## Committee Business

### Standing Order 30

**Ms Armstrong (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures):** I beg to move

*After Standing Order 30(2) insert:*

*"(2A) No private Member's Bill shall be introduced in the Assembly after the final sitting day in June of any relevant year.*

*(2B) In this Standing Order, a relevant year is the calendar year immediately preceding the calendar year in which, in accordance with section 31(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, a poll for the election of an Assembly will take place."*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have up to 10 minutes to propose and a further 10 minutes to wind up the debate. All other Members will have five minutes. I call the Committee Chair to open the debate

**Ms Armstrong:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I am pleased to bring the motion to amend Standing Orders to the House.

The Committee is considering a range of issues to improve the effective and efficient operation of plenary sittings and Committee meetings. The proposed change is the first of a number of changes and additions to Standing Orders that we hope to bring forward over the coming months.

The motion proposes an addition to Standing Order 30(2) to provide for a final deadline for a private Member's Bill (PMB) to be introduced to the Assembly on the last sitting day in June of the penultimate session of a mandate. While providing for a final deadline for introduction, the Speaker continues to retain considerable discretion to set deadlines for completion of other key stages of private Member's Bills, including the opening and closing of the submission window to gain access to PMB support and deadlines for completion of key stages, such as the final proposal.

That proposed change to Standing Orders originated from the work of the previous Committee on Procedures in the previous mandate. In 2020, the Speaker asked that the Committee consider a review of the private

Member's Bill system to enable any changes or improvements that were identified to be put in place after the 2022 election. While that work was delayed due to COVID, the Committee completed the review and reported to the Assembly in March 2022.

The review identified a number of refinements and improvements to be made to the process, and the Assembly approved the Committee's seven recommendations, several of which required changes to Standing Orders, on 14 March 2022. The Committee on Procedures is considering those changes as one of its priority areas of work.

During the review of private Members' Bills, while acknowledging the unique nature of the previous mandate, the Committee noted that the high volume of PMBs during the busy end-of-mandate period was far from ideal, and that, to give them a more realistic chance of completing their passage through the Assembly, a priority for PMBs should be to avoid the significant pressures on plenary time at the end of a mandate, given that Executive business takes priority when scheduling business. The Committee received considerable evidence to suggest that the existence of a firm deadline for the introduction of a PMB might help the scheduling of plenary time, allow Committees to structure their forward work programme with greater clarity, and provide MLAs with more confidence in relation to the timelines for their PMBs. The Speaker at that time, Alex Maskey MLA, the Business Committee and the Chairpersons' Liaison Group all supported such an approach, with the Speaker stating that, if such a deadline were to be set out in Standing Orders, any milestones set out in the guidance for PMBs would have more force. Having considered the evidence, the Committee recommended that, to prevent congestion in the latter stages of a mandate, meaning that PMBs are stalled in order for Executive legislation to be prioritised, a final deadline for a PMB to be introduced to the Assembly should be set in Standing Orders for the end of June in the penultimate session of the mandate. That is what we are proposing today.

Members will be aware that the Speaker, Edwin Poots, published the 'Handbook for Members' Bills for the 2022 to 2027 Mandate', which sets out the arrangements for the development of a Member's Bill during this mandate, on 7 May 2024. In drawing up the guidance, he reflected on lessons learned from the previous mandate, including the findings and recommendations of the review that was conducted by the previous Committee on Procedures. The handbook also

references the planned introduction of a deadline of 30 June 2026 in Standing Orders for private Members' Bills in this mandate and notes:

*"In practice the relevant date would be the final sitting day in the calendar month."*

The Speaker also indicated that that date:

*"is not intended to be seen as a target.",*

and that Members should aim to achieve the introduction of their Bills as soon as is practicable. From my personal experience, I echo that advice.

It is important that all Bills introduced to the Assembly should stand a realistic chance of completing their passage before the end of a mandate. Likewise, it is important that the Assembly has the opportunity to produce effectively scrutinised and quality legislation. The motion brought by the Committee on Procedures today provides for an amendment to Standing Orders that will support the achievement of those aims, assist PMBs in avoiding the significant pressures on plenary time at the end of a mandate, and implement the recommendations of the previous Procedures Committee, as endorsed by the Assembly in March 2022.

In closing, in my capacity as Chairperson of the Committee, I thank the Deputy Chairperson, Sinéad Ennis, and all members of the Committee for their constructive approach and detailed input to this issue and to the work of the Committee more generally. I also thank Assembly Legal Services for its assistance in drafting the changes. I hope that Members will view the proposed change as a constructive and useful addition to Standing Orders to manage the flow of PMBs during the mandate, and I look forward to the debate.

As a private Member who has brought through a private Member's Bill, which became the Integrated Education Act, I welcome the clarification. At the end of the previous mandate, it was extremely busy. There was a risk that, after working for six years on the Bill, the time, expense and effort could have been wasted if plenary space was not available. Thank goodness that it was. When you invest so much of yourself, your staff and your resources into legislation that you are committed to delivering, it is right that Members give themselves and the rest of the House time to bring their legislation forward so that due consideration and scrutiny can be completed. Introducing a deadline by which the First Stage

has to be completed, as the Speaker said, should not be seen as a target. In my experience, the earlier that you can introduce the Bill, the better that the PMB system will work for you.

**Mr Carroll:** I oppose this change to Standing Orders. It is already difficult for smaller parties or independent voices to get a private Member's Bill completed or passed in the House. The proposal makes it more difficult for those to complete the process. Obviously, it limits the time during which people can introduce them.

Let us think about it. We could have the absurd situation in which something new occurs or there is a groundswell for movement on a particular issue in June 2026, yet no private Member will be able to introduce legislation or act on the issue until June 2027, if they are re-elected. That is what the proposal effectively does. As I said, it limits the voices of smaller parties, independent Members and parties outside the Executive. It is really damaging to democracy, which is what this Building should be about, to the people outside and to the parties outside the Executive. It is an attempt to stifle democracy.

Think about the legislation that came through in the last few months of the previous mandate. Obviously, not all of it was perfect, and we did not agree fully with all aspects of it. Had this amendment been in place then, we would not have had any climate change legislation. We would not have had my trade union Bill, and we would not have had period poverty legislation or the Private Tenancies Bill. The list goes on and on. I implore people —.

**Mr O'Toole:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Carroll:** Yes, I will give way.

**Mr O'Toole:** I sympathise with some of what the Member says, but I think that he will acknowledge that some of the Bills that he spoke about made it on to the statute book because they were introduced at a time at which there was a realistic prospect of doing so. As leader of the Opposition, I want the Executive to introduce legislation for us to debate and scrutinise. That is their job, and they have the resources to do so. We have to be realistic, however, and say that Bills that are introduced a few months before the end of the mandate will not pass. It is a bit disingenuous for us to pretend that they will.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Carroll:** The Member should do a bit more opposing. He is meant to be the leader of the Opposition. He is essentially saying to any of his party's Members who come to him in June 2026 that there is no chance of a new private Member's Bill. If something changes in society or in the real world, which happens regularly, voting for this change to Standing Orders means that his Members will have to wait at least another year until such a Bill can be debated in the House.

**Ms Armstrong:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Carroll:** I will give way, yes.

**Ms Armstrong:** For clarification, we currently have a deadline by which a private Member's Bill has to be submitted to the Speaker's Office for consideration. The change to Standing Orders states that, once Members have got the go-ahead for their PMB, they have until the final sitting in June 2026 to submit it to the House. It does not prevent a Member from introducing a private Member's Bill; rather, it helps confirm the last date by which Members can expect the House to have the time to scrutinise it.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Member for her intervention, but it does not change my substantive point that the proposed change is restrictive and prevents Members from introducing legislation for a year, when Stormont returns and if they are re-elected, which is up to the electorate.

The proposed change is restrictive, and Members, especially those who are supposed to be in opposition, should oppose it.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Sinéad Ennis to make a winding-up speech on the motion.

**Ms Ennis (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures):** I welcome the opportunity to conclude the debate on the motion to amend Standing Orders to provide a deadline for a private Member's Bill to be introduced in the Assembly on the last sitting day in June in the penultimate session of the mandate. I thank the Chairperson for opening the debate and the Members who contributed to it.

It is worth noting that there was unanimous support in Committee for the change. There does not quite seem to be unanimous support in the House. I hear what Mr Carroll says, but, at the heart of it all, it is not about the volume of legislation that we pass; it is about the scrutiny

that we provide when we are passing it. Nobody will pat us on the back for the amount of legislation that we pass; it is about how good the legislation is when we pass the end product and how it benefits society. It is incumbent on us to ensure that we have rules and regulations in place that allow us to do that in a way that benefits society.

As the Chairperson outlined when opening the debate, the motion is being considered today because the previous Assembly endorsed the recommendations of the review of private Members' Bills in March 2022. Private Members' Bills are a valuable and effective way of achieving considerable change. The amendment to Standing Orders to provide a deadline for the introduction of such Bills achieves a balance between setting standards and procedural requirements to ensure that the development and scrutiny of legislation is, as I said, rigorous and thorough and not restricting a Member's right to develop and introduce a Bill. As the Chair outlined, it is also the most realistic deadline to achieve the aim of ensuring that private Members' Bills introduced in the Assembly stand a realistic chance of completing their passage before the end of a mandate. The change should assist the scheduling of plenary time to prevent congestion in the later sessions of a mandate that could result in private Members' Bills being stalled in order for Executive legislation to be prioritised.

I thank the Chairperson and those who contributed to the debate. I thank the Committee members for their constructive and diligent approach to considering not just this change to Standing Orders but others that the Committee intends to bring forward in the near future. I commend the motion to the House.

**11.30 am**

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

*Question put.*

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 66; Noes 4.*

**AYES**

**NATIONALIST:**

*Mr Baker, Mr Boylan, Miss Brogan, Mr Delargy, Mrs Dillon, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn,*



*Mr Gildernew, Miss Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms Kimmins, Mr McAleer, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Mrs Mason, Ms Á Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Miss Reilly, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.*

**UNIONIST:**

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Beattie, Mr Bradley, Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Crawford, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Miss McIlveen, Mr Martin, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart.*

**OTHER:**

*Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mr Donnelly, Ms Egan, Mrs Guy, Mr Honeyford, Miss McAllister, Mr McMurray, Mr McReynolds, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Mr Tennyson.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Armstrong and Ms Ennis.*

**NOES**

**NATIONALIST:**

*Mr Durkan.*

**UNIONIST:**

*Mr Gaston, Ms Sugden.*

**OTHER:**

*Mr Carroll.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Carroll and Ms Sugden.*

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>[94.3%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>[95.7%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>[93.5%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>[93.8%]</i>

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*After Standing Order 30(2) insert:*

*"(2A) No private Member's Bill shall be introduced in the Assembly after the final sitting day in June of any relevant year.*

*(2B) In this Standing Order, a relevant year is the calendar year immediately preceding the*

*calendar year in which, in accordance with section 31(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, a poll for the election of an Assembly will take place."*

**Mr Speaker:** Please take your ease while the Principal Deputy Speaker takes the Chair.

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

## Private Members' Business

### Health Service Transformation: Funding

**Mrs Dodds:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly acknowledges the deepening crisis engulfing the health service; believes current hospital waiting times are unacceptable and must be urgently and sustainably addressed; notes with particular concern the 9.4% rise in the number of patients waiting for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment in the Northern, Southern and Western Health and Social Care Trusts between June 2023 and June 2024; reiterates support for the full and timely implementation of the 'Systems, Not Structures' report by Professor Rafael Bengoa in order to deliver a more effective, efficient and responsive health service; recognises the importance of transformation being clinically led, as well as the need to value and reward our dedicated front-line health professionals; expresses concern that the stabilisation package agreed with the Government in December 2023 is insufficient to enable the immediate sustainability of public services or to take forward the much-needed transformation agenda; further believes there is a need for a new, long-term financial settlement with the Treasury; calls on the Minister of Health to work with Executive colleagues to strongly make the case for additional funding from the Treasury; and further calls on the Minister to prioritise and allocate additional resources to tackle the backlog in hospital waiting lists in the delivery of the Executive's forthcoming Programme for Government.*

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

Diane, please open the debate on the motion.

**Mrs Dodds:** Thank you.

The motion is one of the most important that we could bring to the Assembly. It will have a resonance in every family across Northern Ireland. We all know someone who is on a

waiting list; we all know someone who is in pain; and we all know someone on the waiting list who will be diagnosed with an illness more serious than that had they been seen earlier. It is a significant yet difficult issue, but the Minister and the Assembly must grasp it in order to make life better for people in Northern Ireland.

Waiting for treatment has been a fact of life since the inception of the NHS, with statistics going back to 1949, believe it or not, on the number of patients waiting for routine treatment. The NHS's founding principle of care being largely free at the point of use means that the length of time we wait tends to serve as an indicator of the state of the service overall. We should reflect on that point, because it is significant: so many people are waiting because so many elements of the service need to be fixed in Northern Ireland.

I use the word advisedly, but the waiting times in Northern Ireland have become "obscene". Growing demand, funding constraints and staff shortages have contributed to the fact that none of the departmental waiting list targets has been met since 2014: that is 10 years, and those are the targets that I can verify. The result, tragically, is that people will have much poorer outcomes and many will die because their diagnosis or treatment is delayed.

For the debate, I looked at the cancer waiting times in Northern Ireland. There is a 62-day target for patients starting treatment following an urgent GP referral, and only 29.8% of patients with an urgent referral will start treatment for their cancer in that time frame. Imagine the terror and anxiety felt by a woman who discovers that she has breast cancer and realises that, in Northern Ireland, of the patients seen by a breast cancer specialist following an urgent referral — we are supposed to have a 14-day target for that — only 34.1% of women will be seen in the appropriate time. That is obscene and shocking; it is to our shame. It is something that needs to be fixed. Minister, this is not a get-at-the-Minister issue. We want to work to make sure that all of us — collectively — fix these issues.

Last year, there was an increase of 9.4% in the number of people waiting for an appointment with a consultant following their referral by a GP. In many specialities, there is a much, much longer waiting time than there is in others. We need to address those issues. They are very, very significant. We have heard for a long time that Northern Ireland has the worst waiting lists in the United Kingdom, but has the approach that we have tried so far brought us any closer

to significant progress? We have made progress at the margins, but not significant progress that will help us to address the issue. Does anyone in the Chamber have confidence that we will see significant improvements if we continue to do the same thing that we are doing? I say this, to the Chamber: simply doing a little more and investing a little extra will not make enough of a difference, and continuing in the old way, with small contracts at the end of the year for the private sector, or when money becomes available, will only have minimal impact. Staff, busy in their NHS jobs, doing a little extra at the weekend or, perhaps, one day through the week, is only playing at the margins. We need a fundamentally different approach.

Officials have told the Health Committee that we are not far off having the appropriate capacity to be able to deal with the regular, anticipated workload of routine and emergency cases, year-on-year — that is good — and it is the backlog that is the massive challenge. We need a better answer than simply, "Give us more money" or, "We can't fix this until you give us more money". The motion specifically addresses the issue of money. I hope that money becomes available, although, I must say, as devolution was being restored, we were the only party that said we had insufficient amounts of money. However, we cannot simply sit about and do nothing until more money arrives: we need to look at the alternatives.

I have suggested seeking to partner with large national or international providers. There are renowned US non-profit organisations that should be encouraged to take an interest in Northern Ireland. Some already operate in the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic, and our political relationship with the United States should be able to assist us in trying to interest those people in helping us address the crisis in our health service. However, we would need to be willing to offer large enough bundles of procedures to release the efficiencies and ensure that those people would come.

Other areas that should be pursued include organising our waiting lists on a regional, Northern Ireland-wide basis to permit same-time access, regardless of where someone lives. There are far too many inconsistencies in the wait times across the trusts in Northern Ireland. I know that our Minister speaks about inequality in health service provision, but this is a structural inequality that needs to be addressed. We could include in that Province-wide centres of excellence for rapid diagnostics or scopes, and understand that the very expensive equipment that we use for that

should not be simply switched off and shut at 5.00 pm. One of my local hospitals — Daisy Hill in Newry — is a classic example of where we need to ensure that we sweat the asset that we have. For many years, more and more staff have been added, but the number of appointments and procedures has not increased. I do not believe that that is the fault of the staff. The system is far too inefficient, and insufficient emphasis continues to be placed on prevention, leaving too many people with a preventable illness ending up requiring treatment.

One in four adults in Northern Ireland live with two or more long-term health conditions. When patients require treatment, they are not flowing through the system as they should. Staff cannot see as many patients as they would like, and they end up operating old and clunky technology that is unfit for the 21st century.

#### **12.00 noon**

If there is a problem at the front end with too many patients, there are also problems at other parts. Hundreds of patients today who are fit to leave hospital have to stay there while taking up a vital bed. In mid-March, in a question for written answer, I asked the Minister of Health for the figures for those who were fit to leave hospital but were unable to do so: at that time, it was over 600 people. That is the equivalent of Craigavon Area Hospital and another of our smaller hospitals being consistently out of use. We cannot create an efficient system if that is the situation in our health service. I presume that, during the winter, that might have been much worse. Fixing waiting lists is a complicated issue and requires us to fix social care.

Lord Darzi's report last week stated that 13% of beds in England were lost through delayed discharges. What system can operate under that level of delayed discharge?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Mrs Dodds, time is up.

**Mrs Dodds:** In England, the numbers of delayed discharges are published each day, and we should do the same in Northern Ireland.

Thank you for listening to this. I apologise that I did not get finished, but this is something that I am absolutely passionate about. I hope that the Assembly can support the motion.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you. I call Nuala McAllister to move the amendment.

**Miss McAllister:** Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, and thank you —.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Sorry, Nuala. Just move it, and then I will go through the rest.

**Miss McAllister:** I beg to move the following amendment:

*Leave out all after "responsive health service;" and insert:*

*"agrees that delivering the ambitions of health and social care transformation will require political leadership and an emphasis on service quality; recognises the importance of transformation being clinically led with genuine co-design and partnership working with the health and social care sector; further recognises the need to value and reward our dedicated front-line health professionals; expresses concern that the stabilisation package agreed with the Government in December 2023 and lack of multi-year Budgets is insufficient to enable the immediate sustainability of public services or to take forward the much-needed transformation agenda; further believes there is a need for a new, long-term financial settlement with the Treasury; calls on the Minister of Health to work with Executive colleagues to strongly make the case for additional funding from the Treasury; and further calls on the Minister to prioritise and allocate additional resources to tackle the backlog in hospital waiting lists in the delivery of the Executive's forthcoming Programme for Government."*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you. Nuala, you will have 10 minutes to propose your amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other contributors will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the amendment.

**Miss McAllister:** Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, for keeping us right.

I rise to propose the Alliance amendment. I thank my colleague from the DUP for proposing the motion, which is of vital interest to everyone in Northern Ireland who either is waiting for treatment or has a loved one who is receiving treatment or waiting for treatment. It is important to all of us as elected representatives, it is important to the sector and, of course, it

must be important to the Minister and his Department.

I will focus a little more on an area that has not been touched on, which is collaboration. Whilst we support the motion, we hope to highlight key specific issues that, we believe, were omitted from the original wording. We hope that people can support us on that. It is important to acknowledge that, if any progress is to be made on transformation, it must include partnership working across Health and Social Care (HSC). That means proper engagement and consultation with the relevant allied healthcare professionals, the healthcare workforce and the community and voluntary sector, all of which have a role to play in supporting the Department in its public health goals of preventative health, diagnostic treatment and ensuring that we can tackle the waiting lists.

On the subject of engagement and consultation, we have for too long relied on consultation as a box-ticking exercise. What we mean when we talk about "health transformation" is true engagement with the sector in order to create clinical-led, evidence-based policy to transform our health service. Unfortunately, whether it is through the Health Committee or engagement with stakeholders whom we meet individually and privately as parties, that is not something that we are getting truly from the Department. Too often, the collaborative approach to transformation is lacking.

In recent months, it has come up many times at the Health Committee, particularly on the issues of transformation and tackling waiting lists, that departmental officials and trust representatives have failed to engage with the relevant stakeholders. Just to be clear, there is some engagement across all sectors in Northern Ireland, but, if we were truly to listen to those who are working on the ground, we would see a much greater level of transformation. We can all agree that the surgical hubs, for example, are working and doing a fantastic job, and the Department must be commended for taking the lead on that. Many times, however, many royal colleges have said to us that they have proposals that could make surgical hubs more efficient, but, unfortunately, they are not being brought around the table. There is a difference between having someone sit on a collaborative forum as a box-ticking exercise and listening, engaging and responding in good faith. We saw that on the Health Committee when discussing the development of the reconfiguration blueprint with the Royal College of Surgeons (RCS). When Committee members from across all parties directly asked, "Has there been a level

of engagement?", the answer, in short, was, essentially, no, unfortunately.

It is important that every party get behind the reconfiguration blueprint. Some organisations already have the blueprint, yet MLAs do not. My understanding is that it is out there and that many have seen it. My only hope is that the point of doing that was for true consultation and to listen to the clinicians, the experts on the ground and the management overseeing the service across all trusts in Northern Ireland. I hope that the reason that the reconfiguration blueprint was issued to those stakeholders was that feedback and engagement. I hope that, when the blueprint comes to the Assembly, there will be positive changes in it.

That is not the only example. The dental access scheme, on which we await further detail, was developed without engagement with the British Dental Association (BDA). That does not really weigh up. We need further information about how the Health Minister will truly collaborate within the sector.

To be fair to the Health Minister, who is new to the job, and the UUP in taking on the health portfolio, it is not just about one party. We need to ensure that there is true political leadership on the issue. We can all stand in the Chamber or sit on our Committees and talk about the need for health transformation, but, far too often here, we see the same parties standing on local picket lines, writing articles for local media and parroting misinformation when presented with transformation proposals in their own backyard. I will stand with the Health Minister when he tackles the issue. There are some, even in his party, who similarly argue against proposals. We all need to get behind the transformation. Whether you are a Member from my party, the UUP, Sinn Féin, the DUP, the SDLP or one of the smaller parties, we need to ensure that we all sing from the same hymn sheet.

I am proud to say that the Alliance Party is an evidence-led party in all aspects of its policymaking, and that includes health service reform. We will continue to listen to the evidence that comes from the health and social care sector and any advice about necessary changes. Our policy will be taken on board by the clinicians, professionals and stakeholders who are listening to the debate.

Another aspect that we touch on in our amendment is multi-year Budgets. If we are truly going to tackle waiting lists, we cannot do that on a year-by-year basis solely. We need multi-year Budgets to ensure that we have a long-term, sustainable plan. We support the

Health Minister and all Ministers in ensuring that we have multi-year Budgets in Northern Ireland.

We also need political stability. We can all talk about health transformation, but we cannot see it if we continually have a stop-start Government in Northern Ireland. We need to reform our institutions to ensure that we can honestly hold our hands up and say that we will transform the health service. We cannot expect one Minister or all Ministers to do that if just one party can pull down the system. I say not just to the DUP but to Sinn Féin to join all the other parties today in committing to never again collapsing the institutions so that we can move forward collectively and truly transform the health service in particular.

I hope that all parties can get behind our amendment. It was tabled not to detract from the motion but to add to it. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

**Ms Kimmins:** I support the motion and the amendment.

Eight years ago, Professor Bengoa launched his report 'Systems, Not Structures', which signified a turning point in the Assembly's intent to transform our health and social care system, with a clear focus on creating a safe, high-quality and sustainable service for people across the North of Ireland. I recently refreshed myself on the findings and the content of that report, particularly as I know that Professor Bengoa is due to visit here again next month. Despite almost a decade having passed since the report's publication, it could have been written yesterday, except that the key challenges have significantly worsened.

We are now in a situation where our health service is undoubtedly in a fragile state. Had the transformation been implemented as outlined in the Bengoa report and, indeed, in 'Delivering Together', which was introduced by my colleague the First Minister and then Health Minister, Michelle O'Neill, we would not be witnessing the impact of the "burning platform" that Professor Bengoa rightly predicted in 2016. We have not moved on from the reactive, acute-centred model of delivery that was operating back then, and that is clearly not delivering for patients and service users. In fact, it is contributing to increasingly higher costs, with an over-reliance on short-term solutions, including expensive agency and locum staff, not just in secondary and tertiary care but in primary care, as we continue to struggle to attract GPs into our local surgeries. We are at a point where this is no longer a tenable position,

and maintaining those existing models is having increasingly negative impacts on the quality and experience of care for patients and service users.

Over the last decade, we have seen the symptoms of inaction, which, the wider public have often felt, was what was meant by "transformation", but let us be clear: the removal of services, such as emergency surgery from Daisy Hill and the South West Acute Hospital (SWAH), is not transformation; it is service collapse.

**Ms Á Murphy:** Go raibh maith agat [*Translation: Thank you*] to my colleague for giving way. Does the Member agree that transformation can truly be achieved only in consultation with communities?

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

**Ms Kimmins:** I thank the Member for her intervention. That is an important point, and I will discuss that in more detail later. We cannot impose decisions on the community, our staff or all the sectors that are critical components of our health and social care service. We must do it in genuine partnership and with co-design and co-production. The only way that we will deliver is by listening to the people who use the services and to those who deliver the services every day and know what the changes have been, whether they were societal changes or changes in the needs of patients.

That leads into my next point, which is the importance of proper workforce planning. We talked about service collapse, and my colleague will be aware of the impact of that in the SWAH. In order to avoid further such service collapse, we need to ensure that we have proper workforce planning, because we have seen that, where that has not happened, our highly skilled workforce has continued to see diminution and dilution as a result. That must be a starting point, and that is inevitably our biggest challenge if we want to see the proper transformation that, we all agree, is required. In this year alone, we have seen some of the dire consequences of a failure to invest in our workforce, and that is failing all our citizens. 'Delivering Together' envisioned the health and social care system as an attractive employer and one that enables staff to develop their skills in a working environment that allows them to do what they do best, and that needs to be our focus now. Staff are burnt out, and they are prevented from doing the job that they want to do by the constant firefighting and crisis

management that they are required to do every day.

In 2016, Bengoa also highlighted the disproportionately high use of emergency and urgent care by people in the North, and that has undoubtedly increased significantly, as we see week in, week out the huge pressures on our emergency departments, with, as others said, some the longest waiting lists in western Europe and extremely long waits for access to GP services and treatment. That points to the need to turn the ship around from a focus on the latter stages of a patient's journey in acute or emergency care to a strong focus on primary care and early intervention where preventative and proactive care will ensure that our population will not only live longer but live a healthier and more active life with better outcomes. Primary care is undoubtedly the bedrock of a properly functioning health and social care system, and we therefore need to see concerted efforts to tackle the existing challenges across primary care so that patients can see the right person at the right time. As others have said, that work cannot occur in isolation. We need to see deliverable actions to tackle our waiting lists. That is not an easy task, given the current financial climate, but that does not mean that we should do nothing.

## 12.15 pm

Those are just some elements of what we need to do to transform our health service. I am under no illusion that many components are required to fully deliver what was envisioned by 'Delivering Together' and the Bengoa report. We have seen chinks of light with the implementation of elective care hubs and the partial roll-out of multidisciplinary teams (MDTs), but we have some way to go. As others have said, we cannot do it without genuine partnership working, co-production and co-design with the people who use the services and those who deliver them. Our communities are anxious and fearful that they will lose services and that things are being removed. We cannot do business like that any more. Staff must not be the last to know about service changes. We must work together, and we are committed to working with the Minister to ensure that that happens in the time ahead.

**Mr Durkan:** We also support the motion and the amendment.

Years of inaction, underinvestment and political paralysis have pushed our health service into a state of emergency. For five of the past seven years, we have been without a functioning

Government, unable to drive or fund the transformation that our health system so desperately needs. Instead of facing that truth, those in power attempt to obscure the harsh realities and shift the blame solely onto Westminster.

We waited for some time with bated breath for a Programme for Government (PFG). We knew that it would not fix the crisis in health, but we hoped that it would at least provide a costed framework with measurable and specific targets. Not only has the draft PFG not offered solutions, but Executive parties could not even get the detail right, with the Health Minister subsequently forced to clarify that the purported £76 million investment to address waiting lists this year was, in fact, old money to address critical categories and will not make a dent in the current waiting lists. It was more smoke and mirrors. Accountability is glaringly absent. The constant reference to budget pressures attempts to gloss over negligence and the lack of duty of care of previous and current leadership parties.

The need for transformation is more obvious than ever. One sometimes gets the sense that Bengoa is being used as a fig leaf for every collapse and closure across the health service, but it cannot be used like that. People want transformation that will mean that they can access treatment sooner. We support the motion and will do all that we can to ensure that transformation is funded. We need to invest to save. On publication, the Bengoa report, like 'Transforming Your Care' years before it, was heralded as a road map to better healthcare. At the time, I warned that a road map to a better destination is great but not much good if you do not have the money to put petrol in the tank. It is important that we get the money to fund actual transformation.

The Darwinian approach to transformation and health needs to be challenged. Recent cuts such as those to phlebotomy and vasectomy services — procedures that GPs delivered at a snip of the price — demonstrate a worrying trend. While I appreciate that some of the cuts have been reversed, the underlying issue remains. Newer, actually transformative and cost-saving services that truly make a difference are being sacrificed due to an apparent last-in, first-out approach. Enshrined services and the "way we do things" policy are being retained amid budget pressures. If I may be a wee bit parochial, the Western Trust is valiantly served by super health workers who are awfully served by the current capitation formula, which must also be reviewed before it becomes a formula for capitulation.

The current system is perverse. We have patients crossing the border in busloads from the South for procedures in the North such as cataract surgeries, while patients here cannot access the same treatment in a timely manner. Would you rather travel for two hours or wait for two years for healthcare? That is the question that we need to ask. Clearly, a more strategic, all-island healthcare model would benefit everyone, ensuring quicker access to vital treatment and better health outcomes across the board. The success of the ROI reimbursement scheme is testament to the need to drive cross-border solutions. I would very much welcome the return of that scheme as an interim solution to assist with the agonising wait for elective surgery.

People want an Executive that will do what matters most, not one that just says that they will. That means transparency on moneys that are invested and budget cuts that are applied and a workable framework that offers a ladder for our health service to climb out of the dark depths to which it has been consigned.

**Mr Chambers:** I welcome the fact that the Assembly has this chance to discuss one of the most important issues in Northern Ireland right now: the unacceptable health waiting times. Whilst enormous advances in health treatments and technologies have been made over recent decades, we must be honest and accept that too many people in Northern Ireland do not receive the quality of service that they need, deserve and, indeed, are entitled to. For some people, it may be OK to wait longer for treatment, but, for others, the risk of coming to further harm increases with every excessive wait. Cancer, for instance, is a disease that does not wait; instead, it often thrives during periods where interventions are delayed.

There may be many things that divide the Chamber, but there is political unanimity that patients and health workers deserve better. Lengthening waiting lists may be the current problem, but we must recognise that they have developed due to over a decade of underfunding, a reduction in training places and the closure of hospital beds. For some treatments, the waiting lists have been so long that individuals and families have been left feeling that they have no choice but to pay what are often huge sums of money to the independent sector. Whilst I want to stick by the mantra that our health service is there for everyone, based on need and not the ability to pay, that sentiment has become increasingly strained. Through our offices, I am sure that we all know of cases where people have borrowed

money just to try to claim back some quality of life. It has only been in the past couple of years that we have been able to get sufficient numbers of staff into the workforce. Unfortunately, the damage had already been done, and there is a huge waiting list backlog.

It has been over three years since Robin Swann published the elective care framework, which was a detailed and realistic road map for tackling Northern Ireland's appalling hospital waiting lists. At that time, there was political unanimity for it. The framework had 55 clear action points and was endorsed by all Executive parties, and commitments were made to allocate the £700 million of funding that it required. Yet, within less than a year of its being published, the Executive collapsed, the deadlines for setting an overall multi-year Budget were missed and the damaging mistakes of the past were soon repeated. Instead of Health being prioritised, its opening allocation was cut in cash terms. Parties can call on the Minister of Health to invest in addressing waiting times, but, effectively, they are doing so having tied one arm behind his back.

**Mrs Dillon:** I support the motion and the amendment on the deepening crisis in our health service. It is not just about numbers; it is about real lives, real communities and the future of healthcare across the North. The cracks in our system are most visible in social care, which forms the foundation of our healthcare services. Each and every one of the chief executives, when they gave evidence to the Health Committee, said that that was their single greatest challenge.

Without a well-supported social care system, our entire health service will continue to buckle under pressure. Carers who tirelessly provide essential services for our elderly, disabled and vulnerable citizens face increasing challenges. They are undervalued, underfunded and, too often, undersupported as they carry the weight of a broken system on their shoulders. As we all know, many of those carers are women, and women make up the backbone of paid and unpaid care in our community. It is high time that those women and, indeed, all carers are fairly compensated and that their work is recognised and respected.

The situation in rural areas such as those in my constituency of Mid Ulster is even more dire. The inequality of healthcare access between urban and rural areas is stark. People living in rural communities face a healthcare system that is harder to access, with fewer resources and longer waiting times. The distance to services

and lack of transport options create additional barriers, leaving rural residents to struggle for the care that they deserve. That inequality is unacceptable. Everyone, regardless of where they live, must have equal access to healthcare services. Ensuring that we have infrastructure and accessibility needs to be part of the transformation process. However, solutions are available if we begin supporting, funding and using our primary care sector, GPs, community pharmacists, specialist nurses and, vitally, our community and voluntary sector, which is already underfunded and has its funding consistently reduced. Many of the answers and solutions are being pointed out to us every day, as Nuala McAllister mentioned. The Minister needs to work with clinicians, staff and, importantly, communities in order to implement the solutions.

There is also a need to seriously look at real and meaningful cross-border healthcare collaboration with the rest of Ireland. I do not mean having people head on buses to private hospitals; I mean serious cross-border collaboration. Sharing specialised services and creating joint facilities along the border could significantly reduce travel times for rural patients, alleviating the burden on local services while increasing access to much-needed care. We know that that is a possible solution for residents in places like Fermanagh and Derry and those right along our Western Trust area. Initiatives like the Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT) programme have already proven how successful collaboration can be. Expanding such partnerships is not just an option; it is a necessity if we are serious about addressing the healthcare crisis, especially for our rural communities.

In the context of social care, cross-border cooperation is equally critical. Many of our carers live and work in isolated areas and often lack the support that they need. By working across the border, we can ensure that carers receive better training, resources and support. Carers are the lifeblood of our healthcare system, and we must do everything that we can to support them.

We have a blueprint for change in the Bengoa report, 'Systems, Not Structures'. The report provides us with a clear road map for making our health service more effective, efficient and responsive to the needs of our people. However, as the Member said, you cannot do that without funding. You cannot take a car down the road without petrol. We all understand that transformation cannot happen without proper funding. The stabilisation package that was agreed last year was a step in the right



direction, but it falls short of what is needed. We need a long-term financial commitment from the British Government to fund us to secure the future of healthcare in the North. As I have said before, the British Government must step up and properly fund the North, because if we do not act now and secure a long-term financial settlement from the British Treasury, we will see our healthcare system continue to deteriorate. The British Government must recognise their responsibility to ensure that the North's health service is adequately funded. We are not asking for special treatment. We were underfunded by the previous British Government, and the British Treasury has now acknowledged and accepted that. We cannot expect healthcare professionals to continue working in hospitals that are understaffed and do not have the proper facilities and resources.

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

**Mrs Dillon:** The issue can be addressed only with proper funding. We understand and accept that.

**Mr Robinson:** I again address the growing crisis in our health service — a crisis that touches every corner of Northern Ireland and affects every one of us in the Assembly and, more importantly, the people whom we all represent. Our health service continues to be at breaking point. As is said ad nauseum, urgent action and financial resources are needed to address it. Current hospital waiting times are simply unacceptable. We have reached a critical juncture where thousands of patients are being forced to wait far too long for their first consultant-led outpatient appointment.

### 12.30 pm

Between June 2023 and June 2024, we witnessed a staggering 9.4% increase in the number of patients who are waiting for such appointments across the Northern, Southern and Western Health and Social Care Trusts. That is a reflection not just of the strain on the health system but of the human toll that it is taking on people. More than 340,000 people are now on a waiting list for a first outpatient appointment. That is just in four of the five health trusts. Families are being left in limbo, patients are left suffering and healthcare professionals are left with an impossible task. At the Health Committee, we have been told that one of the most difficult issues that a GP must face is referring someone onto a waiting list, knowing that their patient will be on that waiting list for many years to come and that

they will be helpless to improve their chances of an urgent appointment.

Just recently, we received correspondence from a representative of a large group of parents and carers from across Northern Ireland who have children with complex medical needs. Those children are awaiting percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy (PEG) insertion surgery. It can be done only at the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. That waiting list has now increased to five years. Around 90 children in the Province are awaiting that surgery. Many of those children are suffering the consequences of long-term nasogastric feeding. The fact is that they might not survive five years to get that particular surgery.

The stats on cancer care are equally concerning. As of the first quarter of 2024, the percentage of patients who were starting treatment following the decision to treat was 86.5%, which is significantly below the target of 98%. For urgent GP referrals, only 29.8% of patients began treatment within the target of 62 days, in stark contrast to the 95% target. The percentage of patients who were seen by a breast cancer specialist within 14 days was 34.1%, far below the target of 100%. Those figures are not just numbers; they represent patients, our constituents, who are waiting far too long for critical treatment.

We are all concerned that, despite the urgency of the situation, the stabilisation package that was provided by the Government in 2023 falls way short and will not take forward the transformation agenda that we all need. That has been borne out by the Fiscal Council, which has said that the package will be swallowed up by public-sector pay rises. The DUP is on record as saying that it fell short and did not provide for a long-term outcome. While we all want to see a long-term, fair funding plan, we also need to see a detailed plan from the Health Minister on the future of our hospitals, including the Causeway Hospital, which, on the face of it, looks to be a case of managing downgrade. The health service has always been the pride of our nation, built on the principle that no one should suffer because they cannot afford care. That principle is now gone.

Six months ago, in a previous debate on waiting lists, I said:

*"All of us can give accounts of people whom we represent who have no other option but to part with their life savings or to borrow many thousands of pounds for urgent treatment, forcing themselves into a world of debt. These are good, decent, salt-of-the-*

*earth people who may have worked themselves to the bone all their days and paid into the NHS only to be let down. ... [Some] part with money that they can ill afford, [but many] others cannot ... Those people descend into greater ill health, which, ultimately, becomes more complex and expensive to treat. Some even die. That is the stark reality".*

— [Official Report (Hansard), 20 February 2024, p11, col 1].

It has got worse since I said those words six months ago.

I have also talked in the House about my own health issues. I suffer from chronic pain. I have been in and out of hospital constantly. I am on multiple waiting lists. The motion is timely because I stand here in extreme pain, even with potent tablets. I am on a waiting list for treatment. I have been on that waiting list for so long that I cannot even remember how long ago I was referred. It is now into years. I stand here with a condition that will not kill me. Thousands of our constituents are on waiting lists with conditions that, ultimately, without timely intervention, they will die from. We must turn that tide. I look forward to the Health Minister's comments.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you for that, Alan.

**Ms Flynn:** I thank Diane and Alan for tabling the motion and the Alliance Party for the amendment that it has submitted. As we know, tackling hospital waiting times and the backlog of patients awaiting care requires long-term solutions, including the training and recruitment of more doctors, nurses and specialists, and, most importantly, tackling health inequalities and helping people to live healthier lives. However, how are we going to do that when, essentially, at the moment, the entire Health budget is spent on acute services and time-critical cases? If we want to move towards preventing illness rather than treating it, we need to invest in primary and community care.

Minister, we heard from your officials at the Health Committee last week about some really great examples of transformation that are in action at the moment, including elective care centres, rapid diagnosis centres and the mega clinics, but, like those clinics, longer-term reform must continue. Central to that reform is addressing the health inequalities and trying to improve our health through primary care and care in the community.

I am really pleased that the Minister has stated previously and publicly that his prime area of focus is health inequalities, but we need to see additional investment and physical interventions to really help to tackle them. We talk about health inequalities very often in the Chamber. The Minister recently gave us a shocking example of what a health inequality actually looks like and what it means in reality to our constituents and the people we represent: the unacceptable fact is that women in our most deprived communities can expect to live 14 fewer years in good health than those in the least deprived communities. I am sure that we all wholeheartedly agree with the Minister of Health that, a quarter of the way into the 21st century, that really is not acceptable. That is what transformation needs to be about. It is not about boxing it into one issue, such as the fact that women in the most deprived communities are living 14 fewer years in good health; it is about all the issues that we are talking about. That is what transformation and health inequalities are about.

What more can be done in the immediate future with the limited resources that we have available to us from the British Treasury to try to stop that depressing reality? I welcomed the Health Minister's announcement in July that covered the planned initiatives that we are going to see, hopefully, over the next few months, including the Live Better initiative, which is going to try to bring more targeted support to communities in terms of screening, vaccination, mental health, emotional well-being support, and blood pressure and cholesterol checks. However, if we are not moving forward in tandem with trying to support our primary care in the transformation process, how are we going to fully and genuinely implement all those great initiatives around screening and vaccination etc? The point was made to me by a GP in my local area recently that, if we try to put in place additional screening, mental health supports, additional services and targeted services, they still need to be backed up with the staff and personnel to try to meet the people who need the help and follow-up support.

GPs and primary care must be supported to lead on health reform and transformation. One way to accelerate that change and transformation is to deliver on multidisciplinary teams for all GP areas across the North. At the moment, only seven out of 17 have access to MDTs. We were made aware at the Health Committee last week that a transformation bid is going to be submitted to try to extend those MDTs across all areas. That is true transformation, and it is a good start to

transformation. The Minister will be aware that the Health Committee has requested sight of the proposals for the hospital reconfiguration. Again, that is going to be a massive step forward in transformation.

I end my remarks by talking about one of the biggest missed opportunities around transformation, dealing with health inequalities and trying to help people to live happier and healthier lives: the continued and stark underinvestment in mental health, suicide prevention and addictions. I am not trying to bring a negative to the conversation; our underinvestment in mental health has been a legacy issue over many years, but when we are talking about trying to prevent harm and ill health —

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

**Ms Flynn:** — and trying to support people, those issues really need to be looked at. Perhaps, even given the constrained finances, we could get an increase in that budget.

**Mr Gaston:** I cannot but begin by noting the irony of the motion. This motion has been proposed by one of the lead parties in the Executive, which tried just last week to sell us a Programme for Government as a great plan for the future of Northern Ireland. What do we find on waiting lists when we look at the glossy document? I will say one thing for it: the document is great at identifying the problem. On page 27, a wonderful graph shows us that, year-on-year, the waiting times for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment have increased under successive Health Ministers. Does that sound like delivery? I look at North Antrim, where we have the failure to reopen the Dalriada out-of-hours centre in Ballymena after COVID, meaning that urgent cases have to go to Antrim Area Hospital. Does that sound like delivery? Does launching a further consultation aimed at stripping away general surgery from Causeway Hospital sound like delivery?

Why should we believe that the Executive, made up of the same parties, will do any better than the previous Executive or the ones before them? We have endless millions for North/South bodies and an Irish language Act. Just yesterday, many in the House demanded another £400 million from Westminster, not to fix waiting lists but to build a GAA stadium. What solution does the motion propose? A demand for yet more money from London. If you are going to constantly argue that we are a special case and that we need additional

money, please build a rational long-term case for doing so. Otherwise, you make Northern Ireland look like the *Oliver Twist* of the UK, always just asking for more.

There is, however, a rational case for arguing that, in the long term, Northern Ireland has been underfunded. As I told the House last week, in 2007, the Welsh Government appointed Professor Gerry Holtham to review the impact of the Barnett squeeze and to develop a metric for measuring what Wales needed in order to justify intervention to make sure that the squeeze did not take Wales below the level of service expected in the rest of the UK. Professor Holtham found that, because of higher need, Wales needed to spend £115 per head for every £100 spent in England. The equivalent figure for Scotland was £105 per head. In Northern Ireland, it was £121 per head. Why did the Executive parties not push for that before returning as protocol implementers? That was the time to agree the:

*"new, long-term financial settlement with the Treasury"*

that the motion calls for. Professor Holtham even provided them with an off-the-shelf model, but the truth was that the rush to get back here was more important than the waiting lists.

I will raise an area that needs urgent attention. In July, I was contacted by a parent in my constituency whose young child with severe additional needs had been sectioned earlier that day, due to safety concerns for the child and for those providing care. No spaces were available at the Iveagh Centre. The initial response from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust was that that was likely to be the case for several weeks. Social workers were deployed to the family home, where they had to provide round-the-clock care for eight days until a space became available. The trust staff were helpful, but their hands were tied due to a lack of facilities and psychiatrists at the Iveagh Centre and generally in Northern Ireland when it comes children with that child's needs. No family should have to go through the trauma of their child being sectioned in their home for eight days. Members throughout the House can, I am sure, cite examples from their constituencies.

Simply throwing money at the problem without a plan to fix it will not cut it. There is no point in grandstanding to demand additional money without having first made a long-term financial case to Westminster along the lines of that which Professor Holtham made about Wales.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Minister of Health to respond to the debate. Minister, I advise you that you have 15 minutes.

**Mr Nesbitt (The Minister of Health):** Perfect. Thank you very much, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Members who tabled the motion and the amendment and everyone who contributed. It is not just an important issue; we should be really passionate about it.

**12.45 pm**

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate. I will outline for Members the current position on waiting times; the actions that have been taken and the ongoing actions to address the issues, including, of course, service transformation; the importance of having an appropriately qualified and structured workforce; the complexities of working in a highly financially constrained and challenging environment; and, critically, what we need to do to ensure that we can deliver effective and sustainable health and social care services for all.

At the outset, I fully acknowledge that the people of Northern Ireland are not receiving the timely and effective care that they deserve. Far too many people wait for far too long. It is simply unacceptable that our waiting times lag so far behind those in the rest of the United Kingdom, and it is incumbent on me and on all of us collectively to ensure that we are doing everything in our power to address waiting times.

I do not intend to rehearse at length my position on the Budget, but suffice it to say that the Budget has imposed severe pressures on all parts of Health and Social Care. You do not have to take my word for it. The draft Programme for Government, approved by all Executive parties, explicitly states:

*"It will not be possible to reduce our lengthy waiting times within the funding currently available."*

I welcome that candour and the de facto acknowledgement that the health budget passed by the Assembly is entirely inadequate. My immediate predecessor as Health Minister remarked previously on the irony of Members repeatedly demanding more investment in health, having voted for that Budget. I will not labour the point, but the irony klaxon has been sounding quite a bit in the debate. Can Members really demand more health spending when they endorsed a Budget that gave the

Department of Health less than it spent last year?

We are all aware that elective care waiting times in Northern Ireland have significantly increased in recent years, and I have been clear that that is entirely unacceptable. There are many contributing factors, not least the overall financially constrained environment but also the scale of the gap between funded health service capacity and patient demand and the residual effects of the impact of COVID-19, which had a devastatingly disruptive impact on our health and social care system. In that context, I am mindful of the fact that there was a rise in the number of people waiting for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment in the Northern, Western and Southern Trusts at the end of June. While I do not want to bombard Members with figures, it is important that I be clear about the full extent of the problem. I will therefore draw on the March 2024 statistics, which include four out of our five geographical trusts. At the end of March 2024, 356,000 patients were waiting for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment, 95,000 patients waiting for inpatient or day-case treatment and just under 165,000 patients waiting for a diagnostic test. Of the total number of patients waiting, almost 50,000 were waiting longer than 52 weeks for treatment. Those are eye-watering and, frankly, wholly unacceptable figures for a population of our size.

In addition to the growing backlog of patients waiting, new patients continue to be added, and, inevitably, the gap between demand and capacity exacerbates the problem and waiting lists continue to grow. While I fully recognise the severity of the situation and do not want to understate it in any way, I am encouraged to note that, in overall terms, we are beginning to see small but tangible improvements to the waiting list position. At the end of March, there was a reduction in the numbers waiting for inpatient or day-case treatment for the seventh consecutive quarter, with a 14.3% decrease in the numbers waiting since the same month last year. While that is good news, it only begins to scratch the surface of the problem. Those figures are, of course, not just numbers on a page; they represent individuals, family members and friends who are often waiting in pain for life-enhancing, life-changing or life-liberating treatments. It is understandable that there is a sense of urgency about the issue, but there is also a sense of frustration: deep frustration. The reality, however, is that the health and social care system is hugely complex, consisting of a wide range of varied and interdependent elements.

Members will be aware that, in May, my Department published an updated elective care framework plan. The framework built on the lessons learned from the first framework published in 2022. It sets out a clear plan to address waiting times, with a focus on areas where the impact would be the greatest: for example, areas where high volumes of patients are waiting for non-complex treatments. I am fully committed to delivering that plan and building on the good work that is already being done across Health and Social Care. It is important that I make it clear, however, that delivering on that plan will require sustained investment. The scope to do that is being severely hampered by the belt-tightening constraint of the current financial environment. As always, we strive to do what we can with the limited resources that we have, and, since publication of the initial framework in June 2022, we have seen the successful implementation of initiatives that have led to benefits for patients and, as I mentioned, a small but tangible start to improvements in waiting lists.

Notable achievements include two dedicated day procedure centres at Lagan Valley Hospital and Omagh hospital; elective overnight stay centres at Daisy Hill Hospital, the Mater Hospital and the South West Acute Hospital; the introduction of medical clinics to maximise patient throughput; the expansion of post-anaesthetic care unit beds across the region; an orthopaedic hub at Musgrave Park Hospital; two rapid diagnostic centres; and a programme of outpatient modernisation. It is important that we acknowledge and build on those improvements to ensure that that momentum is not just maintained but increased. It will only be through a continuous and sustained focus on ensuring effective implementation of all those arrangements that improvements will be secured. However, those alone will not address the backlog. We need immediate and sustained investment to secure additional capacity in the short to medium term.

The reality is that improved outcomes will be achieved only with significant recurrent investment to transform the delivery of elective care on a sustainable basis and address that gap between demand and capacity. Although the current financial position is extremely challenging, we must continue to do whatever we can with the budget available to improve the waiting list position.

**Lord Elliott:** I thank the Minister for giving way. He mentioned the South West Acute Hospital, which has the facilities to develop further and help to decrease those waiting lists. Will he

ensure that it is utilised to its full potential in any future plans?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his comment and can certainly assure him that that will happen.

Miss McAllister talked about the plan for hospital reconfiguration. It is at pre-consultation stage. I have asked officials whether it would be possible to bring that plan to the House as early as Monday week, and I await their response. I am keen to do it as soon as possible, and I assure the Member that the assessment of the reconfiguration will be clinically led.

In tabling the motion, Members asked that I work with Executive colleagues to make the case for additional funding to Treasury. I have made the point to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care in London and the Prime Minister that poor mental health and well-being is a legacy issue of our conflict. Therefore, should the Government in London decide to invest in tackling that issue here, there will be no repercussive effect for England, Scotland or Wales. It is a population health issue only in Northern Ireland, so please be assured that I am fully committed to making the case for additional funding.

Some £76 million has been referenced as being invested this year to address waiting lists. It matches the additional investment of last year, but it is significantly less than what is required. It will be used for those with red-flag or time-critical waits: those with cancer or with life-, limb- or sight-threatening issues. The bottom line, however, is that £76 million is not sufficient to do any additional work on those waiting for long periods. It will simply help us to stand still.

We need a long-term collective effort, sustained and substantial investment through multi-year budgets, workforce development and system-wide transformation. Miss McAllister mentioned multi-year Budgets: it is my expectation that, when we get to the financial year 2026-27, we will finally reach the point where we will have a multi-year Budget, which, itself, will be transformational for the delivery of public services.

My Department estimates that, in addition to the £76 million that I referred to, there is a further requirement of £80 million per year to support elective care and reduce the demand/capacity gap and of another £135 million per year for up to five years to remove the waiting lists backlog and for investment across diagnostics, imaging and pathology. Members will recall that my

Department submitted a bid for some or all of that £135 million earlier this year. That included a reinstatement of a form of the cross-border reimbursement scheme, which I am regularly urged to do. In the end, not a penny of that bid was met. The irony klaxon sounds daily in departmental headquarters.

On staff, the importance of an appropriately qualified, well-equipped and fit for purpose workforce to underpin all aspects of continuity and change in service delivery cannot be overstated. This is not just about numbers. It is about different ways of working to get the best services for patients from all available resources and having the right staff with the right skills in the right place at the right time. Work continues across the system to stabilise, expand and develop the workforce and to support the more effective use of staff across different specialities. However, progress in those areas has been hampered not only by the continuing pressure on the service but by the uncertainty about funding. We used to worry about losing staff to Australia; today, we worry about losing staff to Athlone.

Turning to transformation, the motion stresses the importance of the need for:

*"support for the full and timely implementation of the 'Systems, Not Structures' report by Professor Rafael Bengoa in order to deliver a more effective, efficient and responsive health service".*

One of my first actions as Minister was to meet the professor on a Zoom call and ask him whether he would travel back to Northern Ireland for one day, not to rewrite his report but to reboot and remind us and share his impression of the positive international initiatives that have occurred in the past eight years. I hope that the whole of the Northern Ireland Executive will again meet the professor and endorse his views when he is here on 9 October. I expect that he will acknowledge what we have done and that the report has not gathered dust on the shelf, and I refer to some of the advances that I mentioned.

My key areas of focus for the next three years include delivering reform, tackling waiting lists, improving cancer services, addressing mental health and confronting persistent health inequalities. That is how we deliver better outcomes, saving money, saving the health and social care system and saving lives. I will shortly launch a public consultation on the hospital reconfiguration framework: 'Towards a Northern Ireland hospital network'. I understand that, like politics, all healthcare delivery is local.

However, healthcare has made magnificent advances. If I need a procedure that my local facility delivers once a day but I could travel a lot further to a facility that does it 10 times a day, five days a week, I know where I would want to go for that procedure. To be honest, we have to acknowledge that there is a tension between community consultation, co-design and co-production; MLAs' natural desire to preserve and promote local services; and clinical advice. We have to acknowledge that tension and work to overcome it.

**Ms Kimmins:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Nesbitt:** Yes, if it is brief.

**Ms Kimmins:** I thank the Minister for giving way. That point is important, because proper consultation and engagement are vital to bringing communities with us. If people understand what to expect and what the outcomes will be, they are more likely to appreciate the reason for change. Does the Minister agree, given his recent visit to Daisy Hill Future Group, where he saw the impact of proper co-design, that that is valuable?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I agree with the Member. I am simply acknowledging that that needs to be worked through.

I am heartened by the tone of the debate and look forward to working with Members over the next three years to deliver better outcomes.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, Minister. The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The debate will continue after Question Time and the question for urgent oral answer, when Danny Donnelly will be called to wind on the amendment.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.59 pm.*

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

**2.00 pm**

## **Oral Answers to Questions**

### **Education**

#### **Dean Maguirc College, Carrickmore**

1. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Education for an update on his Department's plans for capital investment at Dean Maguirc College, Carrickmore. (AQO 795/22-27)

**Mr Givan (The Minister of Education):** Dean Maguirc College was one of 28 schools included in the announcement on the major capital works programme in March 2022. Due to the extremely challenging capital budget, all those projects were put on hold in April 2023. In February 2024, I was pleased to announce that seven of those projects would proceed immediately, with the appointment of integrated consultant teams (ICTs). Due to ongoing budget constraints and the need to prioritise capital works for special educational needs placements, the remaining projects remain on hold. I will continue to keep those projects, including that for Dean Maguirc College, under review. In addition, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), as the planning and managing authority for the school, has indicated that it will seek to increase the admissions and enrolment numbers at the college through the development proposal (DP) process. That will be key to informing a future major capital works project.

**Mr McAleer:** I thank the Minister for his response. He will recall that, at the meeting on 9 May, which included him, representatives of the school, the MP, CCMS and me, CCMS undertook to begin the development proposal in order to reach a situation in which the approved enrolment number reflects the actual number of pupils, which is 678 this year. Does the Minister have any update on the progress of the development proposal that was agreed?

**Mr Givan:** The Member has, rightly, outlined how CCMS seeks to increase the approved admissions and enrolment numbers — currently 80 and 440 in total — through the development proposal process. When that works its way through, it will come to me for a decision. In the interim, the school can continue to request additional places on an annual basis through the temporary variation process until the DP is brought forward and a decision can be taken.

**Mr Buckley:** Minister, you will know that school capital investment is crucial not only to local

schools but their communities. My constituency of Upper Bann has a large cross-section of schools in which the investment is much needed, but the Minister will know that Portadown College has been of particular interest to me. Is the Minister in a position to update me on progress on that school's capital investment?

**Mr Givan:** The Member and his colleagues have had me in Upper Bann on a number of occasions, and Portadown College is one of the schools that I was able to visit. It was one of the seven post-primary schools that I announced could proceed to the appointment of an integrated consultant team. In the coming weeks, that ICT should be appointed. That will allow the planning for that project to commence.

**Mr Tennyson:** Minister, will you provide an update on the special schools extension and refurbishment programme that you announced earlier this year?

**Mr Givan:** Work is ongoing to audit the special schools estate to identify the capacity issues and how to enhance the schools, and there has been really good progress. I am more than happy to provide the Member with a further update in writing, in which I will detail how that work is progressing.

**Mr O'Toole:** Earlier this year, £150 million in capital spending was withdrawn from the integrated schools to which it had been promised under the Fresh Start Agreement. I welcome the fact that money was allocated to Millennium Integrated Primary School in my constituency — that project was able to proceed — but has the Minister had any further contact with those schools, and is the Department making any plans to make good on the promises that were made to them?

**Mr Givan:** We are well off the topic of the substantive question; nevertheless, I will do my best to provide an answer.

Members previously raised the issue of that funding. I moved quickly to secure funding allocations for integrated schools. We moved those school projects into the main capital projects of the Department, and we have been able to advance a number of them. I reassure the Member that those school projects are being taken forward by my main capital project team. Obviously, we were able to secure funding for the shared education facility in Omagh. I visited that just last week, as we have now moved into the contract phase, and the

construction phase can commence in due course.

## **SEN Pupils: Legal Right to Education**

2. **Mrs Dodds** asked the Minister of Education whether he will work with the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Health to ensure that young people with a statement of special educational needs (SEN) have a legal right to education up to the age of 25, similar to other parts of the United Kingdom. (AQO 796/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** I am committed to ensuring that young people with statements of special educational needs are supported in their transition from school to adulthood. My officials are working closely with colleagues across the Department for the Economy, the Department of Health and the Department for Communities as part of the end-to-end review of special educational needs in order to develop and enhance clear and appropriate pathways for young people who are transitioning from education to adulthood. Transitions is one of 12 workstreams in the end-to-end review, and to further that work, my Department and the Department of Health jointly chair a transitions working group that specifically aims to understand the experiences and perceptions of the transitions planning process. The transitions working group includes representation from the Education Authority (EA), the Public Health Agency (PHA) and officials from the Departments for Communities and the Department for the Economy.

**Mrs Dodds:** Thank you for your answer, Minister. Over the past number of weeks, I have been contacted by a number of parents of young people who have special educational needs. They have had problems getting on to courses in the Southern Regional College (SRC) and with transport, and courses have moved and no one knows what is going on. There may be many different pathways for young people with special educational needs, but do you agree that, rather than having working groups and identifying pathways, the legal entitlement is the most important way of ensuring that we are responsive to the needs of young people with special educational needs? Will the Minister work to ensure that such a legal entitlement is brought forward in legislation?

**Mr Givan:** The Member highlights the issues that constituents have presented, and I have met constituents, as has the Member. I absolutely recognise the concerns about



receiving support, given that young people have come through the education system, for which there is a legal entitlement up to the age of 19. That legal responsibility is then with the Department for the Economy through further and higher education, and various supports come through different workplace schemes that try to help people into employment. Some projects in Lisburn, like Stepping Stones and others, do excellent work, and they link that work with that of the Department for the Economy.

It is very important that, wherever legal responsibility rests, whether it is in my Department for people up to the age of 19 or in other Departments post-19, the transition process should be seamless. It should not require a legal responsibility that comes from my Department to make sure that other Departments are doing the job that they need to do. The public expects, particularly the affected children and their families, that all Departments collectively make sure that we can help throughout the years up to age 25. In other jurisdictions, there is a legal right for that help up to age 25. I assure the Member that I am very committed to working with my colleagues, and I have highlighted how we are doing that and that, when it comes to the transition years, the appropriate support will be provided by those with the responsibility to do it.

**Miss McAllister:** The Minister will recognise that there are many instances when stakeholders have taken the Department of Education to court on behalf of the parents of children who have that legal right to education and are under the age of 18. Will the Minister outline that he will put into legislation the right for children to receive support until the age of 25?

**Mr Givan:** The Member rightly highlights how some parents have had to robustly challenge the lack of support that they have received when statements of special educational needs have been provided. The outworking of the end-to-end review that the Department is taking forward — I hope to be able to outline some further progress on that — is to try to get to the point where people do not need to receive a legal statement, which they can then take to court, challenge and hold to account the authorities that are responsible. We should provide the support without the need for statements, but that support is not being provided. That is why people go down the route of receiving a statement. There are thousands of children who do not have a statement. We have a responsibility to make sure that we provide for them.

It is important that, post 19, legal responsibility sits with the Department for the Economy. In one respect, it is a compliment to the Department of Education that Members believe that it is best placed to provide that support to people, post 19 — I appreciate that — but we should not get lost in the debate around whether it is the Department of Education or the Department for the Economy. There is legal support that both Departments should be providing at the appropriate point at which people reach that age. I want to make sure that the transition process is working properly, but I do not believe that it is working as well as it should.

**Mrs Dillon:** I apologise to the Minister for not being in the Chamber for the start of his answers to this question. Based on what he has said around the transition process, there is a real problem there. That is maybe where the Education Department could do more work — do better work — on giving the information and ensuring that the Economy Department has the information regarding what it needs to have in place. Every young person has value; they can all do something. Sending them to day centres —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Will you come to a question?

**Mrs Dillon:** — is completely inappropriate. It is not the answer for those young people. They need to have value, and they need to feel valued.

**Mr Givan:** I agree entirely with the Member. As part of the end-to-end review of special education, we have identified a number of the key challenges relating to post-school options. They include the lack of available places and the imperfect planning complexities around individual needs. Those responses will inform the future direction of the transition-planning process to ensure that we are best supporting children and young people's statements of SEN. Again, I highlight that this is an issue for my Department, the Department for the Economy and the Department of Health. Three key Departments are involved, and they all need to be moving in the same direction and providing support at the right stage. It does not rest exclusively and entirely on my Department — it sits with other Departments — so there is a responsibility on all of us to get this right for those who need it most.

**Educational Underachievement:  
Protestant Boys**

3. **Mr Brett** asked the Minister of Education to outline his ongoing work to tackle educational underachievement among working-class Protestant boys. (AQO 797/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** I am aware of the continued challenges around underachievement associated with Protestant boys who are entitled to free school meals (FSM). My Department is supporting working-class Protestant boys in a variety of ways. As part of the investment made in schools via the common funding formula, £75 million is provided through targeting social need (TSN), which is based on the number of free school meals-entitled (FSME) pupils in a school. That significant investment provides for literacy and numeracy support across all Key Stages and addresses complex and challenging needs. FSME boys are one of a number of targeted groups that are benefiting from that substantial investment.

In north Belfast, the full service programme involving both Model post-primary schools has been operating since 2006 and is an integral part of how those two schools support their learners from year 8 onwards. The work involves support at transition from year 7 to year 8; support for attendance, emotional health and well-being; parental engagement; revision classes; and much more.

Other examples of support include the actions in 'A Fair Start'. Those actions include the Horizons programme, which is a two-year developmental youth leadership programme for boys and girls. To date, over 400 young people have engaged in and completed vocational development through the Horizons programme. The extended schools programme continues to support disadvantaged pupils before and after school, and I recently announced that funding for this year will continue at the same level as last year, at £8.1 million. More recently, my announcement about the RAISE programme, in May of this year, was focused on raising achievement and addressing educational disadvantage. Shared Island Fund funding of £20 million, over two years, is enabling that work to continue at pace across 15 areas. The engagement process involving all stakeholders in each locality will begin this autumn.

**Mr Brett:** I thank the Minister for an update on his ongoing work on the issue. Does he agree that vital to tackling underachievement is the leadership role that our teachers and principals play in our schools — I know that the Minister will meet the north Belfast principals' forum,

next week, to discuss the issues that it faces — as is the vital work carried out by our non-teaching staff? That is why it was vital that the Minister was able to secure a proper pay settlement for our non-teaching staff.

2.15 pm

**Mr Givan:** I thank the Member for his comments about the successful negotiation that settled the pay dispute for our support staff. He rightly acknowledges the critical work that support staff do. They are invaluable in our schools and across the education system. It was as a result of the work that we were able to take forward in the Department, supported by Executive colleagues, that a fair settlement was reached. It will lead to a significant pay rise for all our support staff and a lump sum payment of £2,550 for full-time equivalents in April next year.

The Member highlights the leadership of our principals. I see that in countless schools that I have visited, not least those in the Member's constituency, where he has had me out to a number of schools. Principals do incredible work. It is my job as the Minister of Education to support them, and I will continue to champion their needs around the Executive table.

**Mr Sheehan:** The Minister rightly identified educational underachievement as a major issue. In his answer, he mentioned the RAISE programme. However, there seems to be an anomaly in the RAISE programme, insofar as some of the big, well-known grammar schools in the leafy suburbs can access the funding, but Bunscoil an tSléibhe Dhuibh in Ballymurphy, Gaelscoil na Móna in Turf Lodge and St John the Baptist Primary School in the middle of Andersonstown cannot. Does the Minister care to comment on that anomaly?

**Mr Givan:** I will take away the names of the schools that he has highlighted and look into the issue. Fifteen localities across Northern Ireland are taking part in that project. The scheme provides a really good opportunity for not just Belfast — there is significant support in Belfast — but every part of Northern Ireland to benefit. I hope that we will be in a position to formally launch the programme in the next number of weeks. I look forward to doing that. The infrastructure around the working groups is being established. Appointments have already been made. We will get on with taking it forward. We need to hit the ground running because there is funding that is available to us. I will, of course, come back to the Member in writing about the particular issue that he raised.

**Ms Mulholland:** Minister, you referenced 'A Fair Start'. Some of the report's recommendations are in your portfolio, including the provision of a

*"targeted developmental programme for all 2 year olds at risk of poor educational outcomes."*

Does the Minister intend to bring that forward as part of the early education and childcare investment?

**Mr Givan:** I thank the Member for raising that issue. Obviously, the Executive agreed the £25 million for early years education. We have been able to roll out the Northern Ireland childcare subsidy, which is an excellent initiative that is already providing support to hard-working families.

I want to take forward the wider work of developing a comprehensive strategy, looking at what support can be provided from age nought. We are collecting data and information that will inform the longer-term strategy. Of course that is one of the areas that I want to see supported. I am delighted that we have been able to stand up a scheme and provide critical support to those hard-working families.

**Lord Elliott:** The Minister mentioned projects and programmes that are under way. Are targets built into those projects and programmes? If so, are they being met at the moment?

**Mr Givan:** Obviously, the RAISE programme is one such area. We will want to measure the interventions to ensure that they are effective. There will be a role for the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in that. As we stand up and develop the programmes, we will need to assess them. In identifying areas, the key component in the criteria was educational disadvantage and outcomes. That was the basis on which we selected the areas to take forward.

We are always measuring output. We look at, for example, academic achievement in schools. That is information that we are able to look at. I am keen to provide greater assessment not just of qualifications and results but of the teaching that takes place in our schools. We need to get back to a place where we are able to assess that and provide support to our teaching profession for their continued professional development.

**Mr Carroll:** Will the Minister agree that economic class rather than religion is the determining factor in whether young people are regarded as a failure? The segregated education system has not helped either. Budget after budget after budget, cuts have meant that working-class people of all stripes have not had the education system that they deserve, despite the best efforts of people working in education.

**Mr Givan:** There are many factors, and social disadvantage is one of them. However, there is indisputable evidence that Protestant working-class communities are more educationally disadvantaged than any other community, and therefore the Member would be wrong to imply that somehow there is not an issue when it comes to community background because there is. That is why we need to make the appropriate interventions. However, those interventions will take place in all communities, and it is important that the RAISE programme, when we get it up and running, will benefit everybody in Northern Ireland.

## Healthy and Respectful Relationships

4. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps he will take to ensure there is support for pupils to develop healthy and respectful relationships. (AQO 798/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** The curriculum provides opportunities to educate young people to develop healthy relationships. Pupils have the opportunity to explore their management of a range of feelings and emotions and those of others, initiating, developing and sustaining mutually satisfying relationships; explore the qualities of a loving, respectful relationship; and develop coping strategies to deal with challenging relationship scenarios. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) relationships and sexuality education (RSE) hub ensures that schools have access to a range of up-to-date, relevant resources. Teachers can download guidance documents and existing resources as well as new RSE resources that CCEA has developed to help teachers to address sensitive issues with their pupils. The resources provide content that can be used or built upon and are designed to offer schools flexibility in their approach to the delivery of RSE. That approach is intended to enable all schools to deliver effective programmes in line with the particular ethos and RSE policy of the school and to ensure that the wide-ranging needs of our young people are met.

Schools are, of course, free to use materials from other sources, and some schools have developed in-house resources together with pupils. The Department would encourage schools to consider that model, provided that they are satisfied that the materials support teaching of the minimum content. Beyond that, the flexibility in our curriculum empowers schools to tailor their approach to teaching and the use of resources to meet the needs of their pupils.

**Ms McLaughlin:** The strategic framework for ending violence against women and girls was published yesterday and is very welcome. Your Department has a key role to play in the prevention pillar in educating young people on healthy relationships and comprehensive sexual education. How much money are you putting in your budget to align with ending violence against women and girls?

**Mr Givan:** I thank the Member for raising that, because that was an Executive policy and strategy that I was pleased to see come through and that I supported, particularly the component that relates to education. There is a responsibility across many aspects of society to engage on the issue. Certainly, I will ensure that my Department engages.

As we welcome the approval of the strategic framework, there is a need to take forward the action plan. It brings into sharp focus my Department's responsibilities, and we will consider how the curriculum can support the wider strategy, because schools have an important role to play in addressing those issues. My Department is establishing an oversight group with key partners to respond to the year 1 action plan. We will also engage with the Gillen review implementation group in developing the strategy in respect of domestic and sexual violence. As we do that, it will be important that resources align as part of that work.

**Mr Dunne:** Will the Minister agree that, in fact, schools are best placed to determine how RSE is taught, rather than through a standard curriculum?

**Mr Givan:** I thank the Member for that question. RSE is a compulsory element of the curriculum, and, in post-primary schools, it is covered under the personal development aspect of learning for life and work. The Member highlights the fact that there is no evidence to suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach delivers a more effective curriculum. That is why we have flexibility in our

curriculum, so that schools can reflect the issues that are current and that their pupils will want to engage with. RSE helps children and young people acquire age-appropriate knowledge and skills. It helps them develop attitudes, beliefs and values. The Member rightly highlights the point that that is done under the RSE policy developed by the school and that the school can discuss issues in a way that reflects its ethos.

**Mrs Mason:** During our recent Education Committee meeting, the Education Authority stated that it provides little support to boards of governors when it comes to designing their school's RSE policy, which, of course, can be difficult to do. Does the Minister think that that is acceptable? What support will the Department provide?

**Mr Givan:** Schools will develop their proposals and policies in that area, and I have highlighted ways in which they can do that. The EA and my Department provide guidance, and I intend to update that guidance. There is also material available from CCEA. The school principal should be capable of navigating the area and making sure that the school is teaching the subject, including the minimum requirements that are set out in the curriculum, while boards of governors should very much be able to do that in conjunction with their principal but also by engaging with and listening to pupils so that, as it is delivered, RSE reflects the issues that pupils want to discuss.

**Mr Butler:** Will the Minister outline what steps he is taking to ensure that pupils with a learning disability or a physical disability receive the same curriculum support and content and other support measures to develop healthy and respectful relationships?

**Mr Givan:** There certainly will not be any differential treatment, irrespective of the type of school. Those in a special school or those in mainstream education who have additional educational needs should all receive the appropriate support. Again, the minimum curriculum content is an entitlement, and I therefore do not expect there to be any difference in the approach taken on such issues.

## School Placements

5. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Education whether he has met the Education Authority to ascertain why there are children awaiting a school placement for this academic year. (AQO 799/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** My Department is in daily contact with the Education Authority through the school admissions process to ensure that all parents nominate a school for their child and that places are available for those children. Fewer than five preschool target-age children whose parents fully engaged with the admissions process have not yet secured a place. Sufficient funded places remain available for those children, though. No child whose parents applied to P1 still needs to secure a place, while there are nine children who applied to year 8 who still need to secure a place.

Parents of those children were advised at the end of the admissions process in May how they could nominate further preferences, and they were directed to a list of schools with places available. The EA has written to those parents numerous times in an attempt to seek further preferences, and staff have contacted the parents by telephone to offer advice and guidance. Given that the parents have still not nominated alternative preferences, their cases have now been referred to the education welfare service, which will engage with the families and pursue any further action that may be appropriate.

Finally, for children with a statement of special educational needs, the SEN placements task force group chaired by the chief executive of the Education Authority meets weekly to discuss progress. My Department is represented on the task force group, including senior officials from inclusion and capital. The Education and Training Inspectorate also attends. In addition, the director of inclusion attends a weekly update meeting with the EA's director of children and young people's services. Six children with a statement of special educational needs still need to secure a place. I can, however, update the House that I am confident that we will be in a position to confirm those places very soon.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I call Mark Durkan for a quick supplementary question. We have less than one minute.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Is work under way to avoid a repeat next year of the situation, which has caused huge stress — trauma, even — for some of the most vulnerable members of our society? Those children do not just fall out of the sky in May or August. Year after year, the problem becomes even more pronounced.

2.30 pm

**Mr Givan:** After I came into office, I said, in March, that an estimated additional 1,000 specialist education places needed to be created for this academic year. I immediately got to work to resolve the issues and to provide clear leadership in that regard by establishing a task force. I can confirm that a total of 183 new specialist provision classes have been stood up for this academic year, which have created more than 1,450 new places in special schools and through specialist provision in mainstream schools for children with special educational needs. There was an absolute prioritisation to invest tens of millions of pounds. I have not received adequate funding from the Department of Finance for that, but I prioritised it within my capital budget. We put the processes in place and created the 1,450 additional places.

The Member is right that the situation is anticipated to continue year-on-year for quite a number of years. I have therefore reconfigured the task force's work so that it does not wait for a number of months but starts now so that we do not have a repetition.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Will the Minister conclude his answer?

**Mr Givan:** We need to get the appropriate support for new capital, because we have flexed the spare capacity in schools. We need to develop new infrastructure. That will require additional investment —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Will the Minister conclude his answer?

**Mr Givan:** — if we are to avoid the problem next year.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

## **Schools: Departmental Guidance**

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Education, while welcoming the fact that he is looking at the issue of phones in schools, and notwithstanding some of the commentary on magnetic pouches, how he squares rolling out uniform guidance for schools in Northern Ireland, as well as guidance on phone usage, which lots of parents are concerned about, with saying that relationships and sexuality education (RSE) should be left up to individual schools. (AQT 531/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** The Member is not comparing like with like: one of those relates to the curriculum. However, I appreciate and thank the Member for his and his colleagues' support for the initiative on mobile phones. A clear evidence base has been established on the detrimental harm and distraction that mobile phone technology causes in schools. The policy is evidence-based, and the guidance highlights a number of options through which schools can implement the Department's clear position that, in a post-primary setting, mobile phones should not be used from when a pupil comes into school until they leave school, and in a primary setting, they should not come into school at all.

I assure the Member that the teaching profession has overwhelmingly welcomed the initiative. A number of school principals have contacted me, including some who want to pilot the scheme, in the constituencies of some Members who may not have been that supportive. They want to come forward and be part of piloting a strategy to inhibit these devices. It is the right thing to do, and schools have my support in taking a robust approach to the inappropriate use of mobile phone technology in schools.

**Mr O'Toole:** Minister, I appreciate the answer, and I am glad that you are taking action in the area, albeit you did not quite touch on the contradiction between the two policies.

I will ask a related question on the Programme for Government. You talked earlier about the importance of tackling educational underachievement, and you specifically mentioned working-class Protestant boys. Why is there not a specific target or intervention for addressing educational underachievement in the Programme for Government?

**Mr Givan:** Obviously, the draft Programme for Government highlights a number of key high-level objectives. Education features in those, particularly that for children with special educational needs. Now is a welcome and opportune time for the public to have their say on the draft Programme for Government. However, I did not need a draft Programme for Government in order to get on with the job of delivering new capital programmes for special schools, implementing the mobile phone policy, resolving teachers' pay and taking forward a huge range of initiatives, including the childcare strategy that I stood up and through which I have put money into the pockets of hard-working families. I did not need a Programme for Government to do those things. I would welcome other Ministers getting on with the job of delivering in their Departments if they were

able to do it as well as I have with my colleagues' support.

## Controlled Schools: Support

T2. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of Education what he is doing to improve support for controlled schools. (AQT 532/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** I thank the Member for his question about controlled schools. This has been an issue for a number of years, but I have become acutely aware of it since taking up my current role. I regret that the Education Authority has, in many respects, failed controlled schools. As a result of the existing structures, controlled schools have become the poor relations in education. That needs to change: controlled schools need equitable and effective support.

I pay tribute to the work that the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) has done with limited resources and no statutory powers. The recent report of the independent review of education highlighted the:

*"complicated systems for school management, which are, in particular, suboptimal for the Controlled sector".*

It proposed:

*"sectors should be supported with greater consistency and equity."*

I am committed to working collaboratively with schools, the Education Authority and the Controlled Schools' Support Council to identify immediate solutions for providing the sector with effective and equitable support and management in the short and long term. To progress that work, I have commissioned a task force, which will be chaired by Mark Baker, the chief executive of the CSSC, and include senior representation from my Department and the Education Authority. The task force will engage representatives from controlled schools as part of its work.

**Mr Bradley:** Thank you, Minister. I could not agree more with your response. What is the expected timeline for decisions concerning controlled schools? Are the Minister and his Department working to a timeline?

**Mr Givan:** The task force will develop a proposed model for controlled schools support, which will include a dedicated body with managing authority responsibility. In the shorter term, it will identify key performance issues and

required improvements for controlled schools within the controlled model. The task force has been asked to report to me by December. I, therefore, expect to have the report before the end of the year. That will allow us to establish the next stage of the process and create a managing authority for controlled schools and, in doing so, ensure equitable treatment. Other schools have managing authorities, but the controlled sector does not, and we need to address that inequality.

### Special Schools: Nursing Provision

T3. **Mrs Guy** asked the Minister of Education to provide his assessment of nursing provision in special schools across Northern Ireland. (AQT 533/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** I welcome the Member to the Assembly, as I have not yet had an opportunity to do so. You are very welcome, and I look forward to working with you as not just a Member for Lagan Valley but someone for whom education is a key interest.

The Member, rightly, raised the issue of support for special schools from allied health professionals including nurses. When I have been out at special schools, it has concerned me to see services being withdrawn, because I have always been of the view that the best place to support the medical needs of those children and young people is in the setting that they are in. That reduces travel and inconvenience. I want to see better support in special schools. Rather than having a withdrawal of medical services from our special schools, I want to see an enhancement of those services.

**Mrs Guy:** Thank you, Minister. Your answer reassures me that you understand the need for that provision in schools. Is the Minister aware that the South Eastern Trust intends to withdraw nursing support from special schools in its catchment area? Would he agree to join my colleague Nick Mathison and me at an urgent meeting with the principals of the affected schools to discuss the trust's decision?

**Mr Givan:** Not only would I be happy to attend that meeting; I am determined that I will attend it. I will also undertake to formally raise the issue with the Minister of Health, because it is important that that support is provided in our special schools. I have highlighted my concern about a withdrawal of services and will engage with the principals involved. That will enable me to make clear representations to the

Department of Health, so that the provision is supported rather than being withdrawn.

### Education: Capital Budget

T4. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Education to set out the latest position with his Department's capital budget. (AQT 534/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** The opening capital budget provision that my Department received for this year was £254 million, which included £20 million of earmarked funding for the Strule Shared Education Campus. As part of June monitoring, my Department made a bid totalling £114 million for high-priority requirements that were not funded by the initial capital budget allocation. In that monitoring round, an additional £15 million was allocated to meet SEN and statutory minor works requirements.

My Department continues to face significant capital pressures, and difficult decisions will continue to be required on prioritisation. I will continue to bid for additional capital budget to provide additional and much-needed funding across many of the Department's capital programmes. Additional funding will impact on my ability to release money for further much-needed major works and bring school enhancement projects to construction stage. It will also impact on ICT programmes that provide end-user devices for schools across Northern Ireland, the absence of which would leave many without the computers that are needed to deliver the curriculum, particularly to our most vulnerable students, and a range of other key programmes such as bus replacement, land purchases, youth capital provision and other smaller projects.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for his answer and, indeed, for his ongoing efforts to secure the investment that education really needs right across our country. Will he update me on the new build at Crawfordsburn Primary School?

**Mr Givan:** The Member had me visit the school fairly soon after I took up office. I am pleased to confirm that, since my announcement in May, the technical designs for the major works project for Crawfordsburn Primary School have been approved by my Department and construction procurement is ongoing. The project will provide a new school building on the existing and extended site at an estimated total cost of £7.3 million.

### Private-school Fees: VAT

**T5. Ms Brownlee** asked the Minister of Education to detail some of the implications of the Government's plan to introduce VAT on fees that are paid to private schools in Northern Ireland. (AQT 535/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** I have significant concerns about the wording of the draft legislation, which will capture all schools, private or not, that charge a fee. In Northern Ireland, that will include 21 grant-aided grammar schools that charge capital, boarding or preparatory department fees. Whilst grammar schools in Northern Ireland are grant-aided for their day-to-day running costs, under this Labour Government, they are likely to be treated as private schools by HMRC for VAT purposes if they charge fees. Affected schools will be compelled to register for VAT and to charge VAT on their fees. My officials and I have been engaging with HM Treasury on the issue to highlight our concerns about the draft legislation. We will continue to make representations on behalf of schools.

**Ms Brownlee:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Has he made any assessment of the implications of the additional burden for the affected schools in Northern Ireland?

**Mr Givan:** Undoubtedly, there will be a significant increase in costs for the families of the children whose schools are impacted on by the decision. It may also have an impact on the public purse. There has been a reduction in the number of prep schools in Northern Ireland. When the parents who pay private-school fees withdraw their children from those establishments, the public sector and the taxpayer have to make sure that there is provision for those children and young people.

So, there will be implications, but, again, I assure the Member that I am making representations to the Labour Government on the issue. I am very concerned about the direction of travel. To date, our representations have not been received effectively by London, so I encourage all Members, where they can raise these issues, to join me in making the case for the schools that will be negatively affected by the change.

**2.45 pm**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I call Lord Elliott for a quick question. We are almost out of time.

**Enniskillen Royal Grammar School:  
New Build**

**T6. Lord Elliott** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposals for the new build for Enniskillen Royal Grammar School. (AQT 536/22-27)

**Mr Givan:** That is one of the school projects that is subject to funding. There is always the issue of getting appropriate capital. I continue to make the case, as I outlined, for increased capital resources to be made available to my Department. I will then be able to provide more positive responses to those Members who are campaigning on that particular issue.

I take the opportunity to congratulate the Member on his elevation to the House of Lords. It is very much deserved, and I commend him as he takes on that role.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Time is up.



## Question for Urgent Oral Answer

### Economy

#### Harland and Wolff

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** David Brooks has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister for the Economy. As the Economy Minister is not available today, the Minister for Infrastructure will respond on his behalf. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question.

**Mr Brooks** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on his engagement with Harland and Wolff, following the announcement of the holding company entering administration, to help secure a positive outcome for the Belfast yard.

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure):** Minister Murphy sends his apologies. He is in North America promoting the benefits of the local economy. He has provided me with the following information.

The financial challenges facing Harland and Wolff have been well publicised in recent weeks. It is disappointing news that the company has now been placed into administration. Minister Murphy is aware of the news reports that a number of parties have expressed an interest in the company, with the submission of first bids to close this week. The company has stated that the administration process will not have any immediate impacts on the Belfast yard and that it will continue to operate as normal. Minister Murphy has written to the British Secretary of State, Hilary Benn MP, and spoken to a number of UK Ministers and senior officials to highlight the importance of Harland and Wolff to the region and the importance of the British Government's continued support. Departmental officials and Invest NI continue to engage with the company and the British Government to keep abreast of the situation, and they are committed to maximising the benefits, where possible, of our local economy.

**Mr Brooks:** I thank the Minister for coming to the House on behalf of his colleague. He will know that Harland and Wolff is not just a large employer in my constituency but an iconic

industry for the whole of Northern Ireland. The situation will have caused some disquiet among the workforce, even though they know that there has been trouble for some time.

Has the Minister's colleague had any engagement with the unions since the announcement to see whether workers have been kept properly abreast of the situation and so that their concerns can be allayed as much as possible when an announcement like that has been made?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I confirm that Minister Murphy has had engagement with the unions on the matter. It is, quite clearly, concerning to the workforce at the yard, who have been dutiful and loyal to the company over many years. As the Member will know acutely, there was a well-known campaign to save it a number of years ago. Our first thoughts are with the workers and their families. I assure the Member that Minister Murphy and his Department are focused on doing everything that they can to secure the future of the yard.

**Miss Hargey:** Following on from the previous contributor's question, the unions are there to represent the workers. Does the Minister agree that any future decision on Harland and Wolff must involve continued engagement with the trade unions that are there to represent the workforce?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Certainly, in the modern era, the success and continued existence of Harland and Wolff are down to the dedication of those in its workforce. As I mentioned to the previous Member to speak, a number of years ago, we witnessed their successful campaign to keep the yard open and secure their jobs. Indeed, since then, there has been a significant increase in employment at the yard. I have no doubt that Minister Murphy will be keen to ensure that there is continued engagement with the unions. Hopefully, a new buyer will come forward as soon as possible and there will be a continued working relationship with the unions.

**Mr McReynolds:** Will the Minister outline what recent conversations have taken place between the Department for the Economy and the Department for Business and Trade at Westminster regarding Harland and Wolff?

**Mr O'Dowd:** There have been conversations. I think that Minister Murphy is in a better position to outline their detail, but I am aware from engagement with Minister Murphy's officials today that they have been actively engaged in discussions over the past period, because,

although news has come that Harland and Wolff has gone into administration, it has been well publicised that there have been issues with the parent company. There are ongoing discussions between the Department for the Economy here and other key stakeholders, including the British Government.

**Dr Aiken:** I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party group on aerospace, defence, security and space.

Minister, one of the big questions is about the Fleet Solid Support ship contract, which is the £1.6 billion contract that Harland and Wolff was part of, with £77 million allocated to Belfast. More importantly, the ships were going to be built and completed in Belfast. You said that Minister Murphy has already been in communication with the Secretary of State, but we have seen in the past week that the Secretary of State is not necessarily that well connected with the rest of the British Government. Will the Minister make an approach through the First Minister and deputy First Minister to go directly to the Prime Minister to ensure that the Fleet Solid Support ship contract comes back to and stays in Belfast? Without that, shipbuilding is finished.

**Mr O'Dowd:** We should not be as definitive as the Member has been about the finishing of shipbuilding in Belfast as a result of a, b or c, but I will certainly make sure that his comments and call are passed on to Minister Murphy for him to engage as he feels fit with the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

**Mr O'Toole:** Minister, thank you for giving us this update today. I echo what others have said about the importance of trade unions. Trade unions are always important to the successful operation of, in particular, a manufacturing business, but that was especially so in this case; they really kept Harland and Wolff going in the most difficult times.

As well as some of the contracts that Dr Aiken talked about, Harland and Wolff has the opportunity to be right at the nexus of key things that are happening in not just the regional economy but the world economy, such as green growth, which we will debate later today, and the manufacturing and maintenance of, for example, turbines, and also our dual market access. I ask the Minister to pass on to his ministerial colleagues the urgency and necessity of placing Harland and Wolff as a particular manufacturing hub, right in the middle of those plans and ideas.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Minister Murphy and I recently engaged with Belfast harbour about green growth and its plans, working in conjunction with Cork around those matters. We also recently met the Transport Minister in the South, Minister Ryan, to discuss those very issues. I assure you from personal experience that Minister Murphy is acutely aware of that and that we have done some work in that regard. I am sure that your comments will be passed on to him.

**Ms Bunting:** I am grateful to my colleague for securing this question for urgent oral answer today. It seems as though the workers in Harland and Wolff are in a perpetual state of flux. It is very difficult for people. The Minister mentioned immediate employment, but what is being done to secure their employment going forward, what is being done to support them in this time of further instability, and what is being done to secure further government and other contracts around shipbuilding to secure the future of the yard?

**Mr O'Dowd:** As I said, Minister Murphy has engaged with all the key stakeholders, particularly the unions, about moving forward. The yard is going through a sales process. The quicker that that is resolved, the better for all, particularly the workers; it will ensure that they know about their futures. That is key to all of it. I think that the Member will agree that all the flux that has happened over recent times is not the fault of the workers. The workers have shown true dedication and skills. The Member is nodding her head in agreement, as I thought that she would. The workers have shown great dedication and skills to Harland and Wolff; a skilled workforce has developed. I assure you that my thoughts and, no doubt, Minister Murphy's thoughts are, first and foremost, with the workers and about securing their futures.

**Mr Carroll:** I declare an interest as a member of Unite the union. I reiterate the need to protect jobs at the site. Minister, can you expand on any conversations with the workers that have taken place to try to ensure that jobs at the site are not reliant on contracts from the MOD or the British Government but are connected to industries that enhance life, provide clean air and green jobs? To me and many others that is fundamental to keeping jobs and ensuring a safe and sustainable future for the site. Will you expand on that earlier point, please?

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Member will understand that I am unable to reflect conversations that I was not directly involved in. I will ensure that his comments and questions are passed on to

Minister Murphy. He may be able to respond to the Member in more detail.

The potential for the diversion of workstreams at the site is immense. As I mentioned to one Member, Minister Murphy and I have already had discussions with the representatives from Belfast harbour around that issue. I have no doubt that Harland and Wolff will play a key role in that.

**Ms McLaughlin:** The evolving Harland and Wolff situation is deeply concerning. The rumours are that there is a healthy portfolio of potential buyers who are looking at the company. Can you assure us that the Minister will engage at the highest level with those buyers in selling and promoting the Northern Ireland plant in particular? Will he engage with the UK Government at the highest level?

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Member will understand that details about buyers and the number of buyers are commercially sensitive. Media reports reflect significant interest in the purchase of the Harland and Wolff Belfast operation, which is a good thing. As I said, Minister Murphy is in the US, promoting the benefits of our local economy and our excellent workforce and the potential for investment and for companies here to do business in the US. The focus is on that matter. All key stakeholders are involved. They have been briefed and are engaging with each other around it. It has to go through a commercial process and to complete that. The quicker that is completed, the better for all, particularly the workers.

**Mr Allen:** I thank my constituency colleague for tabling this important question for urgent oral answer. Minister, this question may need to be answered in writing, but will the Department set out the support that was provided to the shipyard in the past number of years and what it is doing to support manufacturing as a whole in Northern Ireland?

**Mr O'Dowd:** As Mr Allen suggested, that question would be best answered in writing by the Minister.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Members, that concludes the item of business. Please take your ease for a moment or two before we move on to the next item. Thank you.

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

## Private Members' Business

### Health Service Transformation: Funding

*Debate resumed on amendment to motion:*

*That this Assembly acknowledges the deepening crisis engulfing the health service; believes current hospital waiting times are unacceptable and must be urgently and sustainably addressed; notes with particular concern the 9.4% rise in the number of patients waiting for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment in the Northern, Southern and Western Health and Social Care Trusts between June 2023 and June 2024; reiterates support for the full and timely implementation of the 'Systems, Not Structures' report by Professor Rafael Bengoa in order to deliver a more effective, efficient and responsive health service; recognises the importance of transformation being clinically led, as well as the need to value and reward our dedicated front-line health professionals; expresses concern that the stabilisation package agreed with the Government in December 2023 is insufficient to enable the immediate sustainability of public services or to take forward the much-needed transformation agenda; further believes there is a need for a new, long-term financial settlement with the Treasury; calls on the Minister of Health to work with Executive colleagues to strongly make the case for additional funding from the Treasury; and further calls on the Minister to prioritise and allocate additional resources to tackle the backlog in hospital waiting lists in the delivery of the Executive's forthcoming Programme for Government. — [Mrs Dodds.]*

*Which amendment was:*

*Leave out all after "responsive health service;" and insert:*

*"agrees that delivering the ambitions of health and social care transformation will require political leadership and an emphasis on service quality; recognises the importance of transformation being clinically led with genuine co-design and partnership working with the health and social care sector; further recognises the need to value and reward our dedicated front-line health professionals; expresses concern that the stabilisation package agreed with the Government in December 2023 and lack of multi-year Budgets is insufficient to enable the immediate sustainability of public services or to take*

*forward the much-needed transformation agenda; further believes there is a need for a new, long-term financial settlement with the Treasury; calls on the Minister of Health to work with Executive colleagues to strongly make the case for additional funding from the Treasury; and further calls on the Minister to prioritise and allocate additional resources to tackle the backlog in hospital waiting lists in the delivery of the Executive's forthcoming Programme for Government." — [Miss McAllister.]*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Danny Donnelly to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. Danny, you have up to 5 minutes.

**Mr Donnelly:** Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank all Members who contributed to the debate. The tone of the debate was quite right. I thank my DUP Health Committee colleagues Mrs Dodds and Mr Robinson for tabling the motion. We proposed the amendment for the reasons that were outlined by my party colleague Nuala McAllister. In my winding-up speech, I will refer to some of those and to some comments that we heard during the debate.

**3.00 pm**

The first addition in our amendment was to agree:

*"that delivering the ambitions of health and social care transformation will require political leadership and an emphasis on service quality".*

That was referred to by Mark H Durkan as he alluded to Northern Ireland's not being a big place, saying that you could

*"travel for two hours or wait for two years".*

We do have to focus on quality over geography. That is very important. Our services are provided by specialist units, and one hospital will deliver higher-quality outcomes. We know that, and that prevents unnecessary duplication. We will see that going forward.

Liz Kimmins referenced Professor Bengoa's burning platform analogy from 2016. It is notable that Professor Bengoa will return to the Northern Ireland Assembly in a couple of weeks, so it will be interesting to see what his consideration of our current situation is eight years on. Obviously, there are still a lot of challenges, and the platform has burned

significantly since then. That is where we are, unfortunately.

Alan Chambers referenced the elective care framework, which, obviously, has begun to show some success. We are starting to see waiting lists come down in certain areas of care delivery in Northern Ireland because of the implementation of those. Alan also mentioned the inability of the Assembly to deliver a multi-year Budget, and I was encouraged by the Minister's comments about his hopes for a multi-year Budget in, I think, 2026-27. I hope that those ambitions will be realised, and we will do what we can to support the Minister in that.

Linda Dillon mentioned shared services on the island of Ireland. Linda will be aware that the Health Committee had a meeting with the Health Committee from the Oireachtas — I think you were there, Linda — and discussed a lot of the shared services that are available, particularly around cancer, and that is something that we are working together on. It is very good to see that.

**Mrs Dillon:** Will the Member take an intervention?

**Mr Donnelly:** Yes, certainly.

**Mrs Dillon:** As the Member is aware, we are also going to Dublin to meet the Oireachtas Committee there, and it is definitely worthwhile for us to raise this when we are down there. As I said, it is important, particularly in the border areas, where we really could have better access. In the likes of Fermanagh, there could be a difference of two hours in being able to access emergency surgery.

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

**Mr Donnelly:** Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. I certainly agree with that, and it is something that we can work together on.

Alan Robinson reiterated the failure to meet treatment targets, and it is appalling. I think Mrs Dodds referred to it as "obscene", and I agree. Mr Robinson highlighted the fact that the people to whom we refer in the targets are not just numbers but our constituents. I have personal experience of constituents who are spending their life savings and borrowing money to pay for surgery. They are being forced into the independent sector to buy surgery that they should get on a timely basis in our health service. That was a well-made point.

Órlaithí Flynn talked about the health inequalities that women face and the shocking statistic that some women can expect to live 14 fewer years in good health than those in more prosperous areas. That is a very shocking statement, and she made the point strongly. Thank you, Órlaithí.

Timothy Gaston referred to the growth of the waiting lists during the years of stop-start government, and he is right. Timothy is not here, but he is right that we have gone on and off. We should be aware in the Chamber that on-off government makes delivery of transformation in the health service impossible. If the Assembly is not functioning, we cannot deliver transformation, and we certainly cannot deliver multi-year Budgets.

The Minister said that the health service should be effective and timely for all, and it absolutely should. The gap between funded capacity and demand that we see is being exacerbated by problems in the health service, and we see things getting worse in some areas. There are areas where things are improving and people are getting more treatments. That is to be welcomed, and we want to support the roll-out of things such as multidisciplinary team (MDT) services in GP practices across Northern Ireland. While they are not a silver bullet for GP practices, they ease the burden on those practices. I know that GP practices have been happy to hear of the extended roll-out of that and of the surgical hubs.

For those reasons, I encourage all Members to support our amendment, which improves the motion and states that the Assembly will provide political leadership to deliver the best outcomes for our health service, work with relevant local sectors and seek to progress agreed multi-year Budgets.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Diane Forsythe to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion. I advise you that you have up to 10 minutes, Diane.

**Ms Forsythe:** Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. In reflecting on how my colleague Diane Dodds opened the debate, let us remember that we are talking about real lives and real people. We are talking about our families and friends. Diane tabled the motion on a matter that she feels passionately about in order to open up debate in the House, and I thank everyone for their contributions.

The stabilisation package that our UK Government offered, although welcome, does not provide the space or the financial firepower

to take forward the public services transformation agenda in a meaningful way. While we are right to highlight the cliff edge perpetuated by the Government's short-term stabilisation package and the benefits that extra funding could achieve, a lack of money cannot be an excuse for inaction.

When devolution was restored in 1999, the Department of Health received one third of Northern Ireland's block grant. Today, it consumes more than half. We already spend more per person on health than any other UK region. That shows that it is not just about throwing money at the problem.

I thank all the contributors to the debate. It was on something about which everyone feels strongly.

Nuala McAllister, in speaking to her amendment, spoke strongly about cooperation, engagement and consultation. Everyone wants that and recognises that we need to move forward here. Liz Kimmins spoke to the fragility of our health system and referenced our local A&E department at Daisy Hill Hospital, about which we feel strongly, the struggles to attract GPs, and workforce planning leading to crises across service delivery. Mark Durkan rightly said that we need to invest to save and agreed on the need to fund the transformation. Alan Chambers noted how waiting times are unacceptable and how people in Northern Ireland are just not getting the treatment that they deserve. Linda Dillon highlighted the challenges, in particular those of the social care system, which, she said, carried the weight of a broken system. She also highlighted the challenges in rural constituencies.

My colleague Alan Robinson rightly said that our health service is at breaking point and that one of the most difficult tasks for GPs is to refer patients to a waiting list, because they know that they will not be seen for some time. That is a real and concerning statement. Alan also rightly highlighted how the Fiscal Council has said that the stabilisation package offered by our UK Government will largely be used up by the recurrent public-sector pay packages. That is why, last December, when others claimed that we should not look a gift horse in the mouth, the DUP insisted that the package did not go far enough.

Órlaithí Flynn talked about tackling health inequalities. In particular, she spoke strongly on issues that affect women and the need to invest to prevent rather than just treat illnesses. Timothy Gaston spoke about the need for a long-term funding package like that for Wales.

I thank our Minister of Health for being here throughout the debate. I welcome his invitation to Professor Bengoa to come here on 9 October, but I am somewhat disappointed, in that I feel that I heard more of the same from him today. He said that the health budget was inadequate and then listed the details of existing waiting lists: we know that, and we have heard it before. We need to see more being done. We want to offer the Health Minister support through the motion and encourage him to take more action.

We welcome the additional £76 million, but we acknowledge that we need to see more. We also call on the Health Minister to publish a transformation plan with degrees of aspiration for how the allocated funds will support the delivery of transformation. He needs to be able to report the outcomes. We need to see transformation, because we all want to see lives saved. We need to stop treading water and managing the decline.

I want us to join together and make the case for fair funding today, but I would also like to see the Minister of Health set out a clear and ambitious plan for investing that money in the right place at the right time with the right results. He has the support of us all. We just want to see the detail and a plan for moving forward. We ask, through the motion, that we unite to see delivery on that. Lives depend on it.

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

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly acknowledges the deepening crisis engulfing the health service; believes current hospital waiting times are unacceptable and must be urgently and sustainably addressed; notes with particular concern the 9.4% rise in the number of patients waiting for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment in the Northern, Southern and Western Health and Social Care Trusts between June 2023 and June 2024; reiterates support for the full and timely implementation of the 'Systems, Not Structures' report by Professor Rafael Bengoa in order to deliver a more effective, efficient and responsive health service; agrees that delivering the ambitions of health and social care transformation will require political leadership and an emphasis on service quality; recognises the importance of transformation being clinically led with genuine*

*co-design and partnership working with the health and social care sector; further recognises the need to value and reward our dedicated front-line health professionals; expresses concern that the stabilisation package agreed with the Government in December 2023 and lack of multi-year Budgets is insufficient to enable the immediate sustainability of public services or to take forward the much-needed transformation agenda; further believes there is a need for a new, long-term financial settlement with the Treasury; calls on the Minister of Health to work with Executive colleagues to strongly make the case for additional funding from the Treasury; and further calls on the Minister to prioritise and allocate additional resources to tackle the backlog in hospital waiting lists in the delivery of the Executive's forthcoming Programme for Government.*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Members, please take your ease while we change personnel at the top Table.

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

## **Green Growth: Removal of Barriers**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Order, please, ladies and gentlemen. Let us settle down.

**Mr Honeyford:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly recognises that fair and just growth in the green economy is vital for securing Northern Ireland's economic future and delivering on our net zero commitments; welcomes work from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to bring forward a green growth strategy; recognises that this strategy is an important precursor to the delivery of a wider green new deal that will decarbonise our economy and create sustainable green jobs in existing and emerging industries; agrees that the major delays within our planning system are one of the greatest barriers to green growth, inward investment and delivery of vital renewable energy infrastructure; further recognises that, without fundamental reform of the planning system, the ambition to harness the potential of a green growth economy, as set out in the draft Programme for Government, will not be possible; and calls on the Minister for Infrastructure and the Minister for the Economy to work together to deliver fundamental reform of the planning system in order to deliver green growth and maximise renewable energy.*

### 3.15 pm

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

**Mr Honeyford:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

A green new deal is our future. For the economy to grow faster, we need to develop and scale our indigenous businesses, helping them to develop products for export, but we also need inward investment to create jobs here and bring capital investment to Northern Ireland. That work needs to be focused rather than shotgun in its approach, and I and others on the Economy Committee welcome the Minister's economic vision as he attempts to shape the future. Minister Murphy is not here, but I look forward to working with him on the Economy Committee as we try to drive the economic future. This place works best when we all work together.

Alliance puts our economy delivering a green new deal and working towards the green transition high in our prioritisation of issues. Minister Muir is leading the way with a green growth strategy that will help to deliver a green new deal to decarbonise our economy. Alliance will not be found wanting in its support for transformation across all Departments when that helps to deliver the vision of a greener, cleaner environment. That sits alongside our core values of equality, prosperity and reconciliation as we move at pace towards a shared, integrated and united community.

In meetings with energy experts and industry representatives, the same issues that cause delays come up again and again. Every meeting you go to is like Groundhog Day. Top of the list is planning system reform, yet, frustratingly, there does not seem to be any movement towards trying to fix that. It costs all our constituents. I note that, last week, the energy regulator in GB said that the price of electricity there will rise by 10% this winter. I welcome the fact that our regulator has said that that will not be the case in Northern Ireland. Let me spell out in real terms the cost of delaying the delivery of our net zero commitments. Delays hit all our constituents in their pocket. For example, the lack of the North/South interconnector costs Northern

Ireland £55,000 per day. That is the latest figure from the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI), and it works out at approximately £100 on each person's annual bill.

We made a good start on renewables, but lack of public-sector reform has halted the growth of renewable energy. The Assembly's being down for five out of seven years is a large part of the problem. The Minister for Infrastructure is with us, and I am in no way pointing the finger; we are not looking back but moving forward from this point. However, the Assembly has not functioned, and our public sector has not reformed. Delivery of new wind and solar infrastructure is practically at a standstill, with little hope of progress in the near future without planning reform. Investment is moving to Scotland or the South, and the delay in delivering the transformation in renewable energy will further cost each of our constituents. SONI has measured that in real terms at a cost of approximately another £100 per person annually.

The delay has been caused by two things. It is not about lack of interest; it is not about a lack of capital; and it is not about a lack of companies wanting to invest. It is about lack of reform in our public sector. As I have said so many times, it is our role in this House to lay the pitch for others to play on. Our planning system urgently needs reform. I want to make it clear that the need for faster decision-making should not be at the expense of quality decision-making. We need a planning system that delivers sustainable development, protects our environment and works to help our economy move forward while protecting society. We also need a blueprint for where renewables will be situated. That could be a map or an architect's plan with zones for what works where. That will give direction to the market and make it easier for the planning authorities to make quicker and better decisions. It will also give direction to network providers on where they can connect easily to the infrastructure and show where the main infrastructure needs to be developed.

I welcome that the economy and green transition sit prominently in the Programme for Government, but we cannot sit back and cross our fingers that the outcomes will happen. We need to take action and make the changes that we are in control of to create the conditions for others to deliver. Unless we work hard and reform our systems to enable those outcomes, the Programme for Government will be nothing more than words on a page or a pipe dream. Far too often in this place, we have worked to get a strategy, and the strategy is the goal. The strategy should be the starting point for us to

move and make changes. The foot comes off the pedal once we get the strategy, and we celebrate the strategy rather than make it the basis on which we work to achieve and deliver the outcomes. The strategy should be the starting point, and we need to work to its delivery.

The issue with delivering renewables in this region is that the money invested here has been restricted because energy providers cannot navigate our current planning system, which they pay for heavily. Our planning system is not fit for purpose. We need the Minister for Infrastructure to bring forward a plan to reform the planning system as a matter of urgency. Again I say, we have not had the Assembly for five of the past seven years, and we are only eight months into the mandate, so I appreciate that the Minister is not long into office. However, a plan needs to be brought forward as a matter of urgency.

Talking of planning delays, we have heard about the applicant being blamed for not supplying enough information. When you talk to the applicant, that is frustrating for them because it is simply not accurate. If the applicant spends £30,000, £40,000 and more on applications, they bring everything that they have to the process. As all of us who have dealt with the planning system have experienced that, once an application goes in, it gets stuck in the system with consultations, more consultations and even more consultations. That needs to be sorted out.

I was pleased to represent the Alliance Party, alongside Matthew O'Toole from the SDLP, the DUP and Sinn Féin — we were all represented there, bar the Ulster Unionist Party — at a recent Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry round-table event to hear about and discuss the problems directly with the industry. We all agree, as we did at the time, that it was really useful to hear, first-hand, the frustrations and the need for a simple plan — a master plan — to show us where wind and solar renewables would be more appropriate.

The motion calls for Ministers to act. We can develop a plan together quickly that will allow the main infrastructure to be developed to match the connection needs. That will also help make the planning process easier and reassure local communities. Again, I stress that this place works best when we all work together. Buy-in from all of us will be required to help bring things along.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** I call Phillip Brett to move the amendment.

**Mr Brett:** I beg to move the following amendment:

*Leave out all from "welcomes" to "industries" and insert:*

*"welcomes work from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to develop a green growth strategy; highlights that this strategy, once presented by the Minister to the Executive for consideration and agreement, could provide a framework to decarbonise our economy, create sustainable green jobs in existing and emerging industries, whilst recognising the importance of an affordable and sustainable transition for businesses and households;"*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Phillip, you have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes. Over to you, Phillip.

**Mr Brett:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank the motion's sponsors for bringing it to the Assembly. It is an important topic. Since its restoration, the Assembly has, rightly, focused on planning reform. That is something that the Minister worked on considerably before his appointment to office, and it is something that he will continue to work on because it requires urgent attention. However, the focus on ensuring a just and achievable transition is also vital, so I thank David and the other sponsors of the motion.

I have discussed green growth with the proposer of the motion on numerous occasions, along with colleagues on the Economy Committee. We are particularly focused on the £150 million investment zone that the Minister continues to progress. All parties will work together to ensure that all sections of our society in Northern Ireland benefit from that fund. We look forward to the Minister's bringing forward the proposals for consideration by the Committee and the House.

The Democratic Unionist Party is committed to ensuring that the Executive seize the opportunity that is associated with green growth. Across Northern Ireland, we are, proudly, world leaders in business and in how we manufacture low-emission vehicles and infrastructure and produce energy-efficient products and lighting, as well as energy-monitoring systems and renewables, to name but a few. We should continue to shout about



and advocate that not just locally but on the international stage. I know that Minister Murphy is engaged on that on his current trade mission to Chicago, and the Committee 100% supports him in that.

We stood on a manifesto of trying to double Northern Ireland's low-carbon and renewable energy economy to having more than a £2 billion turnover whilst recognising that the transition to net zero needs to be fair for everyone. A greener, more sustainable economy can create jobs, increase prosperity and lead to stronger and healthier communities, all while protecting our natural environment. That builds on the work that Minister Dodds and Minister Lyons did in their 10X vision and that Minister Murphy continues to work on in his economic vision. That is why the previous AERA Minister brought forward his draft green growth strategy — this is what was at the heart of what he was proposing.

As I said, the plans to use the £150 million enhanced investment zone in Northern Ireland is to be welcomed, but the House is very keen to see those proposals as soon as possible. I say politely to the proposer of the motion that it is unclear why they have chosen to table the motion without the AERA Minister first presenting his own proposals on green growth to the Executive for consideration. Mr Honeyford spoke articulately about how we need consensus in order to work together on those issues, so the Minister's not bringing his proposals forward, first of all, slightly flies in the face of Mr Honeyford's comments. Our amendment seeks to build on and helpfully critique the Alliance proposals, which are useful, but our amendment strengthens what has been brought forward. Given the fact that the Minister has not brought his proposals to the Executive or the AERA Committee, at this stage it would be unwise for the House to endorse those proposals or plans, as we have not yet seen them.

There needs to be political consensus on the issue and on how we move forward, as Mr Honeyford said, not least given the hugely constrained public finances and the cost-of-living pressures that are on households and businesses right across Northern Ireland. For the same reasons, we do not think that it is prudent for the motion to include a reference to the "wider green new deal". We recognise that that is established Alliance policy — it is entitled to that position — but it goes far beyond what was agreed in the draft Programme for Government. If we are to take forward Mr Honeyford's warm words about moving forward together, he and his colleagues will, hopefully,

support the amendment. We should use this not as an opportunity to divide the House, as Mr Honeyford articulated, but as something behind which we can all unite, and I hope that proposals come forward from the Minister to the Executive that all colleagues can support, even our friends and colleagues in the official Opposition.

I turn now to planning reform. As I said, the House has discussed that on numerous occasions, and I know that Minister O'Dowd has engaged on it with the industry before and since taking office. As has been articulated, the precautionary way and the very long time that we take to process planning applications in many sectors contributes further to the delay in decarbonisation. Many of the applications that are coming forward for decision would improve our environment and emissions, but as we continue to delay making those decisions, our just transition continues to be delayed. That is notable. In fairness to the Minister, he consulted on a revised regional strategic planning policy on that just last year. I am sure that, when he is summing up, he will update the House on where that consultation sits and on further proposals that he may have.

As I said, the motion is important, as it focuses on issues that all Members should support, but our amendment ensures that those measures will come through the right channels, that the AERA Minister will bring his proposals to the Executive and that the Assembly will continue to work together to grow our economy, ensure that a green new deal is just and ensure that we continue to achieve great things on the world stage.

### 3.30 pm

**Miss Brogan:** The Assembly has a duty to do everything that it can to assist a just transition to a net zero society powered by clean, renewable energy. That is not just a legal commitment but a moral responsibility to ensure that we protect and preserve our environment for future generations. However, we should not allow the development of a narrative that portrays that transition as something that challenges economic growth. The development of a green economy here is a huge economic opportunity for this generation. The importance of harnessing a green growth economy is one of the three missions set out in the Executive's draft Programme for Government.

As an island, we are in a unique position to take advantage of our abundant natural resources, ending a reliance on the volatility of the fossil fuel market that has caused financial distress

for many families and ushering in a new era of energy stability and independence. Across the island, we see the development of state-of-the-art renewables technologies, such as the offshore wind projects being developed in conjunction with Denmark or the innovative work being carried out on hydrogen-powered transport. By ensuring a just transition, we can not only create new jobs and industries but, through upskilling initiatives, maintain and repurpose the expertise that people have acquired in carbon-intensive industries.

The Economy Minister, Conor Murphy, has made decarbonisation and green growth one of the central pillars of his tenure, whilst the Finance Minister, Caoimhe Archibald, despite an extremely challenging Budget, has sought to ensure that funding is in place for green growth and other environmental projects, such as the rescue and restoration of Lough Neagh.

There is no doubt that there are challenges ahead, but we will continue to work with others to harness the potential of a green growth economy.

**Mr Stewart:** I thank the Members who tabled the motion and the amendment, which helps it. I thank the Minister for Infrastructure for coming along. The issue straddles the responsibilities of two or three Ministers. I will speak from an infrastructure point of view about planning reform.

The Minister will know that we have had a successful and balanced debate on planning reform, and we all know the impacts that it will have. Our party fully supports a green growth agenda and moving towards net zero. Undoubtedly, that has already benefited from having legislation in place. However, it is being hamstrung in two key areas. The first is a lack of funding, which has left many areas of development in Northern Ireland hamstrung. The second is planning reform and how difficult it is. Mr Brett referred to that and how difficult that was.

We are all aware of people — locally grown businesses or outside investors — who have pulled the plug on major infrastructure projects here because they were so frustrated with the delays and bureaucracy that they saw in the planning system. That is lamentable, and everything must be done to reform that.

There has been a series of reports, and we waxed lyrical about those in the previous debate. The Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry produced an important report on reform, and the Northern Ireland Audit

Office (NIAO) did the same in 2022. I say that as a member of the Public Accounts Committee. That report is hugely beneficial, and I thank both organisations for those reports.

Significant points came out of them. First, there are the delays. Statutorily, planning committees and procedures should be 30 weeks. Unfortunately, over a fifth of those are extending that, and that has more of an impact on the major significant projects that most affect green growth. I am interested to hear what the Minister thinks about that. Secondly, there is the impact of the silo mentality. It is nearly a decade since planning powers were handed down to local government. Unfortunately, although councils were statutorily required to have local development plans in place by 2019, many still do not have those published. That is not only frustrating; it is leading to a silo mentality.

To quote the Audit Office report:

*"In our view, the 'planning system' in Northern Ireland is not currently operating as a single, joined-up system. Rather, there is a series of organisations that do not interact well, and therefore often aren't delivering an effective service. This has the potential to create economic damage to Northern Ireland. Ultimately, as it currently operates, the system doesn't deliver for customers, communities or the environment."*

That point is well made and should be remembered.

On the issue of the local development plans, not only have they not been finished, but there does not seem to be an overarching Northern Ireland theme to them. We almost have 11 different strategies, but, when it comes to green growth and identifying major infrastructure projects, we fall between the cracks. We often talk about the variance in delivery and in the process, but we will also see, on the back of those reports, variance in how processes and policies are being implemented. When it comes to major, significant policies, that will obviously have a major impact. That needs to be looked at as well.

To finish, I agree with and echo the points that were made by the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry in its feedback. It put forward two or three significant proposals, and one that I and my party agree with is reconstituting the regional planning commission. That would be significant, particularly by bringing experts in the field to

contribute to it. The second proposal is a reform of the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC). The Northern Ireland Audit Office report talked significantly about that, and we need see it removed from the Department of Justice and brought under the remit of the Department for Infrastructure. We also need to see it recast in a similar vein to what was done in England and Wales, with full operational independence and top-level accountability that would be —.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned local development plans. What does it say about the planning system and about the efficiency of the departments that local development plans are now generally 10 years out of date?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Stewart:** That is a valid point and one that I was trying to get to. From memory, the Department required all those development plans to be ready by 2019. It is now 2024 and significant numbers of plans are still only at draft stage, so that is hugely frustrating. Next year, it will be 10 years since the review of public administration (RPA) began and those powers were handed down, and now is the time to see that happening. It also needs to happen as part of a joined-up strategy to make sure that areas and applications do not fall through the cracks and so that we do not have a geographical lottery depending on how different councils bring those reports together.

That concludes my remarks.

**Mr McGlone:** I welcome the motion and the amendment and their focus on fair and just growth in the green economy. I also welcome the work by the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to bring forward a green growth strategy; indeed, I look forward to seeing more meat on the bones of that strategy.

I listened carefully to the proposer of the motion's emphasis on the planning process. Yes, of course, all of us who have been involved in planning applications have seen delays after delays. That can be due to consultation with the NIEA, consultation with DFI Roads or consultation with NI Water, and it can be due to a lack of proper process by agents. All of those can contribute. That is the actual planning process. The green growth strategy goes further than that, insofar as it may well be required —.

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

**Mr McGlone:** OK.

**Mr McNulty:** Does the Member recognise that planning departments are on their knees? Hard-working staff have caseloads that are out of control, and staff are voting with their feet, going down South and getting jobs in planning offices with much smaller caseloads and much higher salaries. That has to be a huge blockage to our planning system in the North.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr McGlone:** I understand that. That is one element of it.

I was about to make the point that, with any green growth strategy, there may need to be changes in actual policy. Before the Department can go ahead and say, "We look at process", which should be done at all stages, when the green growth strategy eventually emerges in whatever shape or form, there may well be, to my mind anyway, projects that do not nicely or neatly fit into any policy niche, and, in order to accommodate the development of that strategy, the Department may have to do that itself. The Executive's draft Programme for Government has already claimed the proposed strategy as its own, so hopefully the Minister will be pushing at an open door.

Decarbonising our economy and creating sustainable green jobs is a vital part of achieving the ambitious target of net zero. The SDLP is proud of its role in helping to secure the Climate Change Act 2022 that set those targets, but the elements required for fair and just transition are absent from today's motion. We tabled an amendment that, had it been selected, would have put those elements into the debate.

The Minister has said that he hopes to have the just transition commission in place next year. He has also stated that he has made the case to the British Government that there should be a separate and additional capital fund for Northern Ireland for a just transition fund for agriculture. Again, that just transition fund and the projects that it will need to help — hopefully they are innovative and creative as agriculture adapts to the changing environment — will require accommodation at least within policies developed by the Department. Indeed, local development plans may have to accommodate certain projects and capacity of zoning lands to accommodate that too.

The Executive's draft Programme for Government talks of supporting the cost of a just transition but provides no detail on how they plan to do that. The details will be vital. The detail on planning policy, planning processes and local development plans — all of it — will be vital. Both those provisions are key elements of a green growth strategy. The longer they take to be established, the further behind we fall on the schedule to achieve net zero. It is important that all the elements are in place before a fundamental reform of the planning system, because any reform must consider the need for the just transition and how it will impact on councils' policies and practices and the policies that the Department for Infrastructure hands down on accommodating the just transition in policies and practices.

There is no doubt that planning reform is needed. Our report and recommendations on the implementation of the Planning Act 2011 was waiting on the Infrastructure Minister's desk when he took office, with, I am sure, plenty of other things. Despite an 11% decrease in planning applications compared with the previous year, in 2023-24 there was a 10% decrease in the number of decisions made or issued. The average time for a decision on local applications was 20.8 weeks, and major applications took an average of 46.5 weeks — both well over the target times — so reform of how things are done is definitely needed.

It is also worth noting that an important part of the previous draft green growth strategy was to publish our first climate action plan by the end of December 2023. We are now approaching a year on from that date, and there is still no sign of the climate action plan.

I welcome the Minister's efforts to bring forward a green growth strategy, and I look forward to those efforts bearing fruit in the just transition elements required by the Climate Change Act, because it is not enough simply to publish the growth strategy, nor to call it "green". A fair and just growth strategy needs careful governance and regulation. We argue that it requires the oversight of an independent environmental protection agency. It requires agreement by the Executive, and, as we have seen with the Lough Neagh action plan, that can take time and might not survive engagement with the Executive in the manner intended or required. That may be why the Minister's party colleagues are calling on his Executive colleagues to work with him to deliver green growth and maximise renewable energy.

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

**Mr McGlone:** The SDLP wishes the Minister well in that regard.

**Mr Boylan:** There is no doubt that the planning system is not operating at its full potential, which is causing delays in planning applications. No one can argue that the planning system does not need to be changed. However, it seems to me that the process of fundamental reform would take a huge amount of time, energy and resources and would ignore the good review work that has been done, which has offered recommendations to ensure that the planning system operates effectively and efficiently. In addition, the recently published Programme for Government, which was agreed by the Executive, commits to improvement in our planning system, and I welcome that focus.

As in all public services, funding issues are impacting delivery in the Planning Service. In many ways, the lack of funding is the chief cause of the issues that applications face. Instead of a complete overhaul, which would be costly, interventions such as the planning improvement programme provide the opportunity to apply existing recommendations from the various reports and to get on with the job of improving the system. Doing what is best for the planning system should be informed by experts who know the issues and, more importantly, the solutions that will allow for a more efficient service. I welcome the interim Regional Planning Commission, signed off by the Minister, which will support the wider planning improvement programme and provide an independent voice on the issues in the system and how best to make improvements.

### 3.45 pm

Poor planning applications can also hamper the efficiency of the planning system. Indeed, the need to improve the quality of applications is highlighted in existing reports. I understand that the introduction of statutory validation checklists will give applicants clarity on the planning application process, which, in turn, will assist in creating a more efficient system. It is important that applications that will benefit from renewables progress efficiently in order to assist in the achievement of important climate change targets.

The delivery of renewables infrastructure with community support cannot be delayed, particularly in rural areas. That reinforces the

need for changes to be made in the here and now that do not rely on time-consuming and costly reform. We can all agree that long-term reform of the planning system is needed, but, again in the here and now, we should be focusing time and resources on progressing existing applications, getting more renewables applications on stream and meeting our climate change targets.

In conclusion, I know that the Minister is committed to ensuring that the planning system operates in an efficient and effective way. The Department therefore must swiftly get on with the job of improving the planning system for all planning applications.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Members who tabled the motion. In speaking to the amendment, my colleague Phillip Brett outlined our party's position. A greener and more sustainable economy is something that all of us can and should embrace. It is not only good for the environment — that aspect is vital — but for job creation and for our having better, healthier communities.

Progress to net zero cannot be viewed in isolation from an economic programme that is focused on green and inclusive growth. A couple of weeks ago, I joined Members from other parties to meet the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, where we heard from industry leaders involved in renewable energy and from those involved in applications that can help us meet our net zero targets. They outlined a number of areas of concern. One of the main stumbling blocks that they foresee is planning. As constituency MLAs, we regularly hear about the challenges that people face in trying to get applications through swiftly and in trying to ensure that consultees and statutory agencies come back to them in a timely manner. I do not lay the blame for that on members of staff. In fact, many of them go to great lengths in their efforts to get applications over the line. Rather, it is the system that needs to be reformed. We need to move forward and try to deal with the system.

As my party colleague Phillip Brett articulated, the DUP is committed to ensuring that the Executive seize opportunities for green growth. It is worth acknowledging that many businesses in Northern Ireland are leading the way on the manufacture of low-emission vehicles and infrastructure and on the production of energy-efficient products.

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

**Mr Middleton:** I will indeed.

**Mr McNulty:** I do not argue with your saying that there is an issue with the planning system, but there is certainly a personnel issue as well. If you talk to the planners in the Newry planning office, they will tell you about their workload and the over-expectation on them to get through their caseload. They cannot keep up with the demand that is placed on them daily.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I completely agree, but I was making the point that it is not a competency issue with staff but rather an issue with stress resulting from the burden placed on them from the number of applications coming in, as well as from tackling the backlog. We all recognise that from what we see in our constituencies across Northern Ireland.

It is important to recognise that the public sector has a crucial role to play. Its role in realising Northern Ireland's green growth potential is sometimes overlooked. The transformation agenda for health, education and infrastructure affords us opportunities to do things differently and more efficiently. That should mean ensuring that green and clean technologies are harnessed for the delivery of vital front-line services. I also want to pay tribute to Translink for leading the way in my Foyle constituency with the first-ever fully electric Metro service. That is an example of leading the way, and, hopefully, others will follow.

Inevitably, the transition to a greener, more sustainable economy will cause a level of disruption and change. In all of that, as we aim to improve people's quality of life through creating green jobs, it would be counterproductive for government to seek to do that by levying costly requirements on business. Most importantly, as we transition to a greener economy, we must ensure that our ratepayers do not suffer and that those who can least afford it are not expected to pay more. As we go forward in doing that, we must do so in a way that is fair to all and to everyone who has a part to play. I urge Members to support our amendment and help us to deliver on the many targets that we have set.

**Mr McMurray:** I support the motion. Green growth must be a priority for Northern Ireland, and I was glad to see that recognised in the draft Programme for Government. An economy that is based on green growth will be good for

Northern Ireland and for the planet. It will benefit us all in many ways: it will help the economy, our environment, our health and our climate. I look forward to the green growth strategy, which will be an important step on the way to achieving that goal.

There are many challenges to overcome, one of which is our planning system and the barriers that it presents to developing the renewable energy infrastructure that we urgently need. We currently get about 45% of our electricity consumption from renewable sources and have a statutory target of achieving 80% by 2030. We made good, strong progress between 2005 and 2016, which helped us to exceed the target of 40% by 2020, but, since then, we have really slowed down. In fact, in the eight years since 2016, we have added only 5%. We now have only six years left to make up the remaining 35% that we will need in order to meet our target, which is concerning.

Recently, back in June, the Infrastructure Committee heard eye-opening evidence from Renewables NI and two renewable energy companies. There are a number of key barriers, one of which is the sheer amount of time that it takes to get renewables applications over the line. Furthermore, major planning applications have a 30-week target, but applications for wind farms take, on average, three years to be processed, and waiting times are increasing. That affects the grid infrastructure too: my constituency of South Down does not currently have the grid infrastructure needed to take on renewable energy sources or to start operating existing ones. As one engineer put it to me, it could take four to five years to sort that out. That needs to be addressed in any forthcoming strategy.

Why are those planning applications taking so long? Staffing in planning departments is an issue. I hope that the Department will look at how existing planning officers can be trained and upskilled. Another reason is that some statutory consultees take a very long time to respond. Technically, they have a target of three weeks, but they often take over a year to respond, and all struggle to provide responses within 21 days. Again, the lack of resources and the lack of specialist staff who can assess complex applications contribute to the problem. We also lack hard deadlines to hold statutory consultees to account. Scotland and the Republic of Ireland have clear timelines and hard deadlines, and they do not experience the same delays.

There are other statutory constraints. Planning departments cannot take the climate crisis into

account when processing an application. We should consider prioritising applications that help to increase our renewable capacity: not to approve them at all costs where valid environmental concerns and reasons tell us otherwise but to give them a fair chance of making it through the system in a reasonable time frame.

Referrals to the Planning Appeals Commission can lead to further delays. Since planning was devolved to councils, 100% of major planning applications for renewable energy infrastructure have gone to the Planning Appeals Commission. By the time that the appeal is decided, the technology is often outdated. The application needs to be amended and goes back to square one and further consultation. It is not surprising that such delays are putting developers off. Renewables NI found that 82% of renewable energy developers now think that Northern Ireland is not an attractive place in which to invest. We need to take note of that alarming statistic.

I want to end on a hopeful note. There are enough onshore wind proposals in the planning pipeline to meet the 80% by 2030 target, if they can be processed in time for connection by 2030. Reaching that target will be key to our goal of achieving a thriving green economy. We need a green new deal and fundamental reform in order to create a planning system that delivers on all three pillars of sustainable development: the environment, society and the economy. There are a few more asks: pre-application discussions and checklists for all major applications will help with waiting times, and those are already under way. Introducing statutory time frames for determining renewable energy applications will be another avenue to explore. Finally, the process for developing local development plans needs to be streamlined to ensure that there is a functional planning system.

**Mr Blair:** I am speaking today as the Alliance spokesperson on agriculture, environment and rural affairs, with a particular emphasis on the environment. As the motion suggests, I wish to acknowledge the work of the Environment Minister in bringing forward the green growth strategy. When discussing its significance recently, the Minister correctly stated:

*"Economic growth and environmental protection are not mutually exclusive but intertwined."*

To use a very real example, the crisis in Lough Neagh and other waterways across Northern Ireland clearly highlights the impact of climate

change and prompts us to find the right balance between expanding the economy and safeguarding the environment. Indeed, the sporadic nature of government, and subsequently governance, in Northern Ireland over the past decade has only made delivering green growth initiatives more difficult.

We can no longer brush the environmental crisis under the carpet for future consideration, as the consequences of our inaction now are being felt and will only continue to escalate. Radical change is not just sensible but critical. To be frank, the biggest barriers to green growth in Northern Ireland are a lack of political will and resistance to change. Those barriers have materialised — I say so respectfully — with the DUP's proposed amendment to the motion; in particular, its removal of the reference to reform and its failure to deal specifically with the interdepartmental aspects of a green new deal, in particular, and why that was included in the original motion.

In history, times of crisis and great upheaval have led to remarkable change. For example, the creation of a welfare state and the NHS after World War II brought about radical and previously unimaginable changes that remain crucial to our lives generations later. Now, we have a similar historic opportunity for change: the chance to develop a long-term strategy to address the climate challenge by balancing climate action with the environment and the economy to benefit everyone in society. I have said many times that, from every sector to every person, we each have a role to play. If anyone believes that we can address the climate emergency, improve the natural environment and advance the circular economy without huge effort, they are seriously mistaken.

It is easy to find examples of obstacles that we have faced to date, such as the Executive's delay in publishing 'The Lough Neagh Report' and its action plan or the pending peatlands and ammonia strategies. Furthermore, it is notable that, in March, just one month into office, the Environment Minister introduced an environmental improvement plan to the Executive, but it has not yet secured Executive approval. As that is a legal requirement, the Department now faces a legal challenge, potentially diverting funds that could, ultimately, be used to address the climate crisis to that specific issue. If we are to seriously deliver on the three pillars of the green growth strategy — climate action, environmental improvements and green jobs — we need that interdepartmental approach. Various government strategies and plans must be

coordinated and integrated to support the goals that are outlined in the green growth strategy.

We must see tackling the climate emergency not as inter-sector condemnation or competition, but as an opportunity to build the future that we want, including preserving our planet for future generations and obtaining economic and social transformation. Action must take place across all levels of government. Alliance remains committed to championing environmental issues by ensuring that focused action comes at every level of government to introduce a green new deal in each council area. However, government and industry are not the sole drivers of climate action and green growth, and nor should they be. Collective societal action through businesses, young people, and the voluntary and community sector is also absolutely vital.

The DUP amendment calls for:

*"an affordable and sustainable transition for businesses and households".*

Let us be clear: any upfront costs represent investment in an improved society for future generations, bringing real benefits and opportunities to everyone's daily lives. Similarly, while Ministers will understandably cite budgetary pressures right now, the cost of delaying action will lead to greater budgetary pressures in the future. There is no point in holding back and waiting for an affordable pathway, because agreement around that point will simply never come. Climate and economic experts are clear that we need a green recovery with huge investment and urgent radical changes to our economy.

Northern Ireland will be left behind as other economies across the globe make the necessary investments in decarbonisation and broader climate action if we do not take action now.

I commend the motion, but I cannot support the amendment.

**4.00 pm**

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Members who sponsored the motion for bringing it to the Floor. I support the motion and the amendment. It is particularly important to speak on this issue, given the events of recent days, but my support is not without reservation as there is a lot of self-back-slapping and a degree of buck-passing inherent in the motion.

The shameful state of our environment is not something that we can be proud of. In February 2020, the Assembly declared a climate emergency, and yet, since then, we have let our environment deteriorate even further. According to the 2023 State of Nature report, Northern Ireland is one of the most nature-depleted areas in the world. The abundance of farmland and bird species has, on average, fallen by 43% since 1996. We have seen a 14% decrease in the number of flowering plants since 1970. In addition, 12% of species assessed across the North are under threat of extinction. We are also seeing blue-green algae blooms in several of our waterways, and stale tasting and smelling water has been pouring out of our kitchen taps over recent weeks, which is frightening. We have some of the most beautiful areas of natural beauty, but we are allowing them to deteriorate, year-on-year. So, while work from the Minister to bring forward a green growth strategy is welcome, it is shamefully overdue.

**Mr Blair:** I appreciate the Member giving way. I understand a lot of what he has said; it is not hugely different from what I said about environmental matters. The Member listed environmental and nature crisis issues. Will he consider whether we should take action on sand dredging on Lough Neagh? My understanding is that his party's Minister passed that in the previous mandate. I said previously in the Chamber that every policy and practice should be on the table —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Will the Member come to the end of his intervention, rather than making a statement?

**Mr Blair:** — in relation to Lough Neagh and the broader environment.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Mr McNulty, I was nearly going to give you two extra minutes, but I will give you one.

**Mr McNulty:** That is a question for the Minister.

We have some of the most beautiful areas of natural beauty, but we are allowing them to deteriorate, year-on-year. So, while work from the Minister to bring forward a green growth strategy is welcome, it is shamefully overdue. The delays in our planning system are known to us all and pose one of the biggest barriers to sustainability and sustainable economic growth. It is shocking that provisional figures for renewable energy applications up to quarter 3 in 2023-24 showed a 30.8-week processing time. The Minister has spoken on multiple

occasions about his commitment to improving the planning system through the work of the planning improvement programme and to publishing a revised regional planning policy for renewable and low-carbon energy, but it concerns me that we are yet to see concrete details on precisely what actions will be taken to reduce the processing time and the burden on overworked planners who cannot cope with their caseloads.

However, that is not the first, or only, barrier to green growth. I welcome the work to bring forward a green growth strategy and the mention of green growth in the draft Programme for Government, but, again, the lack of concrete action and timescales is an area of serious concern. One of the key commitments of the green growth strategy is to develop the North's first climate action plan. How come there is no mention of that in the motion?

We are getting too comfortable with throwing out aims and objectives and empty, hollow motions without any actual actions or time frames to measure progress against. That is, arguably, the biggest barrier to green growth. We can talk about the issue as much as we like, but without effective leadership, we will be talking about it for years, with no action, and we will reach the point of no return. Let us not look back on this moment in shame because we did not do enough. We must take decisive action now to put the necessary measures in place to heal our environment. We must show some real ambition, not hollow motions, on green growth. Demonstrate your ambition by committing to targets and timelines. Without committing to targets and timelines, it is just blah, blah, blah.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Minister, you have up to 15 minutes.

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure):** Thank you, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle [*Translation: Deputy Speaker.*] I start by thanking the motion's sponsors for tabling the motion on the important topic on green growth and for highlighting that we, as an Assembly, need to continue to work together to facilitate and enable green growth for the benefit of all our people. I agree with the assertion set out by the motion:

*"fair and just growth in the green economy is vital for securing"*

our



*"economic future and delivering on our net zero commitments".*

I also support a fair and just planning system, and I will return to that point later.

I acknowledge the work that my Executive colleague Minister Muir and his officials have undertaken to date to bring forward the green growth strategy. I look forward to continuing to work collaboratively on a cross-Executive basis in order to ensure the appropriate progression of strategy, policy and legislation not only to assist in decarbonising our economy and creating jobs but to support the achievement of our wider climate change commitments. For my part, I am committed to building on the good progress that has already been made in my Department, whether through promoting active and sustainable travel; the roll-out of lower-emission buses, as Mr Middleton mentioned; enhancing our public transport services; or ensuring more generally that our existing and proposed infrastructure addresses the many challenges that we face because of climate change.

While I accept that the planning system has a role to play, I do not agree that it is one of the greatest barriers to green growth. No empirical evidence was given during the debate that pointed to that statement being factual. I do not accept that it is the greatest barrier to green growth, inward investment or the delivery of renewable energy infrastructure. In fact, sustainability principles are at the heart of our planning system. The planning system has the protection of the environment, the well-being of people and society and balanced economic growth at its core. It supports a fair and just system. Much of the commentary in the debate thus far has been on the need for developers to bring forward green energy proposals, and quite rightly so. In this instance, most developers will be small to medium-sized enterprises, large corporations or maybe multinational corporations, but we also deal in the planning system with individuals.

However, on the other side of the equation are the persons or communities that may have strong feelings about or objections to a planning application. Their views have not been reflected in the debate. It is important to recognise the fact that planning is literally a contested space at times. That said, many planning applications go through with no objections whatsoever. Where you may have a fundamental change in the character of your community, neighbourhood or environment and given the fact that many green energy projects are on a significant scale, it is understandable that

concerns will be raised, be they by residents, environmentalists or others. It is only right and proper that each argument is tested fully before the decision is made. Arguments that are based on the rights of the developer, be they large, small or medium, and the rights of the resident, the environmental group or the objector, for want of a better term, are all valid and have to be brought to the table. The role of the planning system, be it in my Department or a council, is to decide, based on its policies, on the points of view that are at the table.

**Mr Brett:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I will shortly, after I make this point.

When it goes wrong with some major infrastructural projects, it goes terribly wrong. I think of an event in Galway a number of years ago, although I accept that the development of wind farms was in the early stages. The impact was catastrophic when that went wrong, so it is important that we get it right.

**Mr Brett:** I agree with the Minister. I chaired our local planning committee for five years, and I totally accept that the proposers and those who object to the process both need to have their space. Is it the Minister's view that applicants have the right to have their application decided upon within the statutory time frames and that councils across the Province are failing to do that? It should be done in a timely manner that allows all sides to have their say, but timing is key. I am not trying to deny anyone their say on an application.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I will come on to timing later. The Member is absolutely right: planning matters should be settled in a timely manner. As I work my way through my speech, I will examine where the delays come from and, more importantly, how we can resolve them.

**Mr Honeyford:** I thank the Minister for giving way. Since you stopped, I want to tease the issue out. Do you agree that it would be really useful to have that blueprint? Councils have local development plans, but it would be useful if the energy sector had a Northern Ireland and all-island development plan for where infrastructure should be built, as it would help planners to make decisions and protect communities.

**Mr O'Dowd:** The question is this: who makes that decision? Do I impose my will on councils and local communities? Does the Environment Minister impose his will on councils and local

communities? Or, is that best placed with councils through their local development plans? Currently, the legislation and the will of the Assembly and the Executive reflect that that decision is best placed through local development plans.

A report published by NISRA as recently as 5 September 2024 shows that just under 46% of all our electricity consumption between July 2023 and 2024 was generated from renewable sources. Members will not be surprised to learn that the vast majority of that energy generation has been made possible because of permission granted by the planning system. Notwithstanding those figures, I acknowledge that much remains to be done.

Since taking up my role as Infrastructure Minister, I have been engaging with a wide range of key stakeholders, each with their own perspectives on our planning system. I am also continuing to take forward a wide-ranging planning improvement programme, which has already achieved important progress, including planning application fee uplifts and consultations on and reviews of planning policy and procedures. The review of regional strategic policy on renewable and low-carbon energy is well advanced, and a call for evidence on the potential review of regional strategic policy in relation to climate change has issued. There is also the development of new and amended legislation to streamline and ensure that key aspects of the planning process are up to date and fit for purpose, including bringing forward legislation to enable local planning authorities to produce statutory validation checklists. That piece of legislation is, quite rightly, being scrutinised by the Infrastructure Committee.

The delivery of a comprehensive capacity-building programme to planning offices and statutory consultees in the area of environmental impact assessments and working closely with local government to find efficiencies and improvements to the local development process will all continue to improve the overall efficiency and effectiveness of our planning system. Integral to improving the planning system is the role of statutory consultees, a subject touched on today, and the ongoing work that my Department has been conducting with them and local government through the planning statutory consultee forum. Significant progress has been achieved through the forum, including the development of quarterly and annual reports on statutory consultation performance; a review of statutory consultee advice and published guidance; and the production of a protocol for statutory

consultees that sets out what involvement and support is required for them to support an effective and efficient planning system.

I am also delighted that my Department's bid for the transformation board funding for planning has progressed to the next stage. A successful bid would allow the Department to improve its consultee response times and to appoint independent persons to deal with major hearings and report work that is currently passed to the Planning Appeals Commission. In short, I made a bid for independent examiners, and it is progressing to the next stage. It would also allow us to progress proposals for the four wind farm applications currently in the system and sitting with the commission for one or two years. There is a significant delay at the Planning Appeals Commission, and I am trying to step around that to ensure that those important planning applications that are being delayed are dealt with. I also understand that the Audit Office is undertaking a strategic review of the Planning Appeals Commission.

Members will recall that I addressed the Chamber on planning earlier this year, and I do not intend to rehearse the debate. However, I do think that, in the context of the current motion, it is important to remind Members of some key points. As I have said, under the review of public administration, the Executive and the Assembly agreed to transfer significant planning functions and decisions to local government. That allows local communities to hold their councils accountable for how they discharge their planning functions. Councils, as individual, sovereign political authorities, have hugely important leadership roles in delivering the main operational aspects of the system, including taking decisions on 99% of all planning applications, producing local development plans fundamental to the reformed plan-led system and the effective enforcement of planning control. As I already said, the planning authorities also rely on the expertise of statutory consultees to ensure that important public interest issues, such as road safety and environmental impact, are properly taken into account in planning decisions. Many of my ministerial colleagues will therefore also be directly contributing to the effectiveness of the planning system. That is an important point.

#### **4.15 pm**

When we talk about planning, it often can be a broad-brush statement. It is often seen that we are talking about planners. Yes, planners have a crucial role in the delivery of an effective planning system, but all the cogs of the wheel

that make the job of the planner more effective and efficient also have to be oiled and turning.

As I said, I have already made bids to the transformation fund around the statutory consultees and will continue to do whatever I can to support them. Through the transformation fund, I am looking at the Planning Appeals Commission.

The other element is also the quality of the original planning application that crosses the desk or, more often now, is emailed to the planning system. That includes major green planning applications. The quality of those applications is not always what it should be. When people say, "We have to consult" or, "We had to go back on consultations", I find that, in discussions with some of my departmental colleagues, that means that my Department has gone back to the applicant to say, "This is not right. We need this information to move this project on", and then we are criticised for delays. We are trying to give the applicant an opportunity to present as full a case as possible to the planners so that they can make an informed decision. I have jokingly said to my planners that perhaps we should say, "That application is not correct. Take it back". My planning performance figures would go through the roof. I would be outperforming everyone. That is not — well, it might be the way to go. *[Laughter.]* These debates are useful, and we can have an informed debate about these things. You have to dig deep into some of the issues to fully understand the different contexts of what is going on and what can cause delays. Often, we find it difficult to get a response when we go back to some applicants and say, "We need you to correct that" or "We need that information". It may take weeks or months for them to come back to us, but we face the criticism for it. I have no doubt that our councils have a similar experience.

I recently addressed the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), and we had discussions. It has been said that planners are people. They are members of our community. They work and live in our communities and want the best for our communities. Some of the criticism that they face on social media and elsewhere is totally unacceptable and has an impact on them. In fairness, I have never known it to happen in the Chamber. We live with the rough and tumble of politics, and we face those things, and they have an impact on us too. I appeal to those who feel that it is appropriate to make certain comments on social media and elsewhere about our planners to desist and remember that they are talking about their neighbours or their family friends. Those people are dedicated to

our community. They want to do their best for our community, and they are working to do the best for our community. I fully support them and endorse their campaign for well-being and support for their fellow professionals.

Now is not the time for a fundamental reform of our planning system. I accept that the motion has come forward in good faith. We want to move forward the green agenda, and we will certainly support that. We also want to move forward the planning agenda, and we will work together on that. Working with councils and others, I see progress being made. We have a huge hill to climb, but fundamental reform will delay the changes that we require in our planning system. At a later date, if the Assembly or Executive wish to bring forward fundamental reform, it will open up a can of worms, and some of your council colleagues may not be too keen on you suggesting that we take powers away from them. Just be careful what you wish for.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** I call Deborah Erskine to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. You have up to five minutes.

**Mrs Erskine:** I speak in my capacity as DUP infrastructure spokesperson. I welcome the motion, which brings into sharp focus the need for planning reform, particularly in the context of green energy, and our amendment strengthens that aim.

We have ambitious targets contained in the Climate Change Act 2022, representing a target of 80% renewables by 2030. We sit at 45% renewables, as has been outlined in the Chamber today. Without intervention in our planning system, that target is far out of reach. Mr McMurray must have been reading my notes before coming into the Chamber today, because he is right in saying that, between 2016 and now, our electricity from renewable sources went up by just 5%. In a six-year time frame, we have to increase that by 35%, which is a huge challenge, particularly when we look at some of the issues connected to planning. Currently, the Planning Appeals Commission is not fully equipped to deal with the raft of planning applications in its system, and there appears to be a difficulty in council areas, in particular when we look at wind applications. The Planning Appeals Commission has not met its own performance measures for several years, but I welcome what the Minister has said today about planning appeals.

The stark reality is painted in the 'Accelerating Renewables' report by KPMG, which surveyed developers. Eighty-two per cent said that

Northern Ireland was currently not an attractive place to invest. That was partly due to the lack of support, they felt, for the industry, and a major drawback was planning, both in policy and processes. I have heard the Minister in the Chamber saying that we do not want to send the message out that Northern Ireland is not a place where you can invest and do business. I fully agree with those comments, but we have to be realistic and realise that, unfortunately, there is a word-of-mouth nature around some of this, and, unfortunately, we are not getting a good name for ourselves on planning. If we do not send out a commitment from the Chamber that we are serious about sorting out the issues, particularly in relation to planning and planning reform, the downward spiral of investors can see that and see that we are not serious. It is important that we grasp that.

The bottom line — the Minister talked about it — is how applications are put into the system and the importance of them being tidied up before they go through. However, we have heard in the Committee from global companies and groups that have put in carbon-copy submissions for the likes of wind turbine applications and have been told that they are not up to standard. They are being processed elsewhere within a couple of weeks, but, in Northern Ireland, they can take up to 60 weeks to get through the system. I was informed of one that has been in the system since 2019. We have to grapple with that.

Despite the challenges, we cannot be despondent. There are great examples of businesses in the private sector doing their bit to create a greener economy, such as Encirc in my constituency. It has pioneered the use of biofuels in its furnaces, which reduces the carbon footprint of production by 90%. Its example points to what my colleague Gary Middleton said about the public sector. It has a crucial role to play, which is sometimes overlooked, with regard to green growth potential in Northern Ireland.

Quickly and briefly, I want to move on to some Members' comments. I thank John Stewart for talking with his infrastructure lens. He talked about the same thing around investors pulling out of Northern Ireland because of the elongated planning system. Quite a few Members referenced the LDPs and our frustration with that. I know it is talked about a lot in the Infrastructure Committee. I am running out of time.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** You have run out of time.

**Mrs Erskine:** *[Laughter.]* Thank you, Members, for a good debate today.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** I call Kate Nicholl. You have 10 minutes, Kate.

**Ms Nicholl:** Feel free to intervene if there are any points I miss.

The motion that we tabled today and the ongoing work of Minister Muir to develop a green growth strategy recognises that tackling the climate and nature emergency goes hand in hand with economic transformation and social justice. They are not at odds with each other; rather, they enable one another.

My colleague David Honeyford made it clear that a green new deal is our future, and that is why we cannot support the DUP amendment. Having a deal is so important. Phillip Brett talked about the all-party commitment to the £150 million fund, while Gary Middleton said that a greener economy is better for people and the environment, so there has been agreement on the importance of green growth, and that is really positive.

There is a common narrative in the media about how much it will cost to meet our legally binding net zero targets, but that represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the challenges and opportunities that are at stake. It is so important that we consider the costs of not reaching net zero. We can already see the impacts of climate change all around us, which are hitting the most vulnerable in particular. My colleague John Blair talked about that. Without a serious plan to future-proof our infrastructure and communities against the potentially devastating impacts of the climate crisis, those impacts will only worsen. Gary Middleton talked about the role of the public sector — Deborah reiterated that — and praised the work of Translink in that space. I agree.

Tackling the climate crisis and transitioning to carbon neutrality hold the key to unlocking significant job opportunities across the industries of the future. We urgently need to decarbonise our economy and, by doing so, unlock a fairer and more resilient economy filled with clean and affordable renewable energy and well-paid green jobs. Phillip Brett mentioned the areas in which we are leading and said that we should talk about that more: I completely agree. Nicola Brogan highlighted the innovative work being done in various sectors, including hydrogen. Anyone who has visited businesses such as Artemis Technologies knows that there is a lot to be excited about and to sell.

I welcome the Infrastructure Minister's presence at the debate, his response and his commitment to working with colleagues on delivery. As the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Andrew Muir, previously outlined, economic growth and environmental protection are intertwined and interconnected: a healthy Northern Ireland is a prosperous Northern Ireland. The Minister's plans for a green growth strategy will provide a framework for tackling the climate and nature crisis in a way that enhances economic opportunities across society. The Department for Infrastructure is engaging with other Departments. Patsy McGlone mentioned that there may be a requirement for policy change, and that will be looked at. I particularly welcome Phillip Brett's enthusiasm and excitement about the upcoming green growth strategy. I hope that that is an indication that the strategy will not take as long as the environmental improvement plan did to make it on to the Executive agenda. Justin McNulty's point on ambition and delivery is taken, and I am confident that the Minister will not be found wanting there.

To enable transformation, we can no longer tinker at the edges of the planning system. It came up time and time again in the debate that fundamental reform is needed if we are to deliver the green transformation that our communities and our economy require and deserve. David and a number of other Members mentioned that, when talking to the energy industry and experts, that comes up as a real issue. David also talked about instability being an issue, and that is so true: lack of reform in the public sector is a big problem.

John Stewart made a really important point about people having to pull the plug on major projects because of bureaucracy. He rightly said that that is lamentable. He talked about reports that highlight planning delays and the impact of the silo mentality. In its 2024 report on planning reform, the NI Chamber of Commerce and Industry stated that mechanisms for prioritising renewable energy projects will be vital if we are to meet our decarbonisation targets. If we are to make significant progress towards the target of 80% of energy consumption from renewable sources by 2030, our planning system has to be geared towards that end, while safeguarding our environment and delivering new green jobs across our communities.

Cathal Boylan, who, I know, is passionate about planning — we have had conversations about it — outlined the reviews that have been done and said that the Programme for Government

contained commitments. The Minister went into detail on that. Andy McMurray talked about the 30-week planning target. Wind farms can take three years, though. There is an issue with staffing in planning. It is a skills issue that we really need to address. Deborah touched on how the Planning Appeals Commission is not fully equipped to deal with all the applications and agreed that there is a particular issue with wind.

We need to work together to deliver. Strategies alone will not be enough; we need to deliver. John Blair, who is arguably the biggest environmentalist in the Alliance Party, talked about the consequences of inaction and how they are already being felt. The biggest barrier to green growth is the political will, and radical change is critical. He told us that we have a historic opportunity and that we are talking about the birthright of our children and of "future generations".

#### 4.30 pm

The climate crisis has the potential to devastate — it already does. The answer to the challenge cannot be to bury our heads in the sand and pretend that the impacts will never reach us. It is too late for that. We have to learn to adapt and overcome. We must address the climate crisis head-on and in an inclusive manner that brings communities with us, delivers greater prosperity and protects our environment for generations to come.

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 29; Noes 15.*

#### **AYES**

*Mr Allen, Mr Bradley, Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mr Clarke, Mr Crawford, Mr Dunne, Lord Elliott, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Gaston, Mr Harvey, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Mr McGlone, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNulty, Mr Martin, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Brett and Mr Harvey*

#### **NOES**

*Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mr Donnelly, Ms Egan, Mrs Guy, Mr Honeyford, Mrs Long, Miss McAllister, Mr*

*McMurray, Mr McReynolds, Mr Mathison, Ms Nicholl, Mr Tennyson.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Ms Bradshaw and Mr McMurray*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly recognises that fair and just growth in the green economy is vital for securing Northern Ireland's economic future and delivering on our net zero commitments; welcomes work from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to develop a green growth strategy; highlights that this strategy, once presented by the Minister to the Executive for consideration and agreement, could provide a framework to decarbonise our economy, create sustainable green jobs in existing and emerging industries, whilst recognising the importance of an affordable and sustainable transition for businesses and households; agrees that the major delays within our planning system are one of the greatest barriers to green growth, inward investment and delivery of vital renewable energy infrastructure; further recognises that, without fundamental reform of the planning system, the ambition to harness the potential of a green growth economy, as set out in the draft Programme for Government, will not be possible; and calls on the Minister for Infrastructure and the Minister for the Economy to work together to deliver fundamental reform of the planning system in order to deliver green growth and maximise renewable energy.*

**4.45 pm**

*Motion made:*

*That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken).]*

## Adjournment

### Lough Erne: Pollution

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** In conjunction with the Business Committee, I have given leave to Deborah Erskine to raise the matter of pollution in Lough Erne. Before I call the Member to introduce her topic, I advise Members that I have been notified by the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that he is unable to be in the Chamber this afternoon. The Minister of Justice — thank you — will respond on his behalf. I call Deborah Erskine. You will have up to 15 minutes. Over to you, Deborah.

**Mrs Erskine:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Justice Minister for coming to talk about this important issue, which is affecting my constituency.

Pollution incidents in our waterways have been brought into sharp focus in recent years due to the sighting of blue-green algae in the likes of Lough Neagh. During recent summers, that has extended beyond Lough Neagh, with incidents being reported in Lough Erne as well. I do not need to remind anybody in the Chamber that Fermanagh is one of the most beautiful parts of Northern Ireland and the UK. It has stunning natural beauty, and tourism is a key economic driver in our area. I am sure that the Justice Minister, who is in the Chamber, will, if she has visited the area, attest to the fact that it is a hidden gem in Northern Ireland. Fermanagh has a proud, rich heritage of fishing, with hotels and B&Bs filled with tourists from the rest of the UK and Germany, in the past and beyond, who have come to fish in our loughs. The old Fermanagh District Council's slogan on the signage was, "Fermanagh welcomes you, ... naturally!". However, that has been slightly tarnished with increased pollution incidents, and I am keen that our area does not become another Lough Neagh, which might happen without intervention soon.

For example, take the Kesh river. There were 10 pollution incidents on that river from 2021 to 2023. There was a very disturbing major fish kill in September 2021, which killed thousands of brown trout. Over the summer, our local newspapers have carried extensive coverage of pollution incidents. I welcome the fact that the AERA Minister saw that and agreed to come to Fermanagh with me just last week to see and hear about the scale of the issues. Whilst our rural area has many farms lining the banks of Lough Erne, I send a very strong message today that farmers are not always to blame for

those incidents. Yes, there are those who could do much better, but we cannot tar an entire sector with the same brush. We must be careful not to pit one section against another.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office published a report on the deteriorating water quality in Lough Neagh, which is largely due to failed and outdated waste water infrastructure that is trying to cope with increasing demands. Storm overflows, which we know are supposed to act as emergency relief valves during heavy rainfall, are now frequently discharging into Lough Erne. In actual fact, we are not aware of the rates in full because event duration monitors are not fully funded for the entirety of our shores and banks. In the Chamber, I often repeat the fact that Northern Ireland has more overflows per head of population per kilometre of pipe than any other region in the UK. I can take Members to housing developments and businesses where, unfortunately, overflows into our waterways are a common occurrence. We must all do better to tackle the issue. We cannot allow any sector to hide behind another while knowingly acting wrongly by polluting our waterways.

The concern is that environmental damage could be long-lasting. Algal blooms can lead to what are known as dead zones in the water, which would be devastating to our recreational fishing fraternity. During my time as a councillor, I spoke to Erne Anglers, which shared a presentation with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council in 2019 about pollution incidents and the amount of rubbish that was dumped into Lough Erne. The situation has deteriorated much more in the space of five years. Inaction is simply not an option.

In July, in the Chamber, I asked the Minister whether his Department would help. Given that this is a cross-departmental issue, it is important that we all work together to see how we can fund and manage the scale of the problem. The answer was slightly disappointing. We need to tackle the issue head-on together. Surely the cross-departmental nature of the issue is also what the Lough Neagh report is all about.

I am not sure whether the Justice Minister will be able to answer this today, but I want to find out about the progress being made on the statement of regulatory principles and intent (SORPI) arrangements and the plans to tackle the pollution incidents in Lough Erne in the frame of the Lough Neagh report, implementing it not just for Lough Neagh but across waterways in Northern Ireland. In the summer,

a worrying headline in my local newspaper read:

*"No specific measures' to tackle algae as toxic chemicals discovered on Lough Erne".*

The newspaper report said that DAERA had admitted:

*"There have been no specific measures employed ... to control blue-green algae".*

I know that staff monitor the levels in the water, but I want to ensure that we do not come back to the Chamber with a post-mortem on our beautiful Lough Erne. I want to ensure that we send a strong message today that we want to tackle the problem together and definitely do not pit sections of our community against one another. It is a vital message to send from the Chamber.

I welcome and thank Members for coming to the debate. I am sure that they will outline and discuss some of the other issues relating to it.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** All other Members who speak will have up to seven minutes.

**Ms Dolan:** The rising threat of pollution in Lough Erne is an issue that affects all of us who call this beautiful region home. Lough Erne, with its stunning landscapes, historic islands and rich biodiversity, has been a source of pride for generations. Its waters have sustained livelihoods, nurtured our wildlife and offered moments of peace and reflection to countless visitors, but, today, that natural treasure, like many others, such as Lough Neagh and Lough Melvin, faces an unprecedented challenge.

Rising pollution levels in Lough Erne are no longer an abstract concern but a clear and present danger. We are witnessing increased levels of untreated waste water and plastic waste finding their way into our waters. Those pollutants are damaging not only the beauty of the lough but the ecosystems that rely on it. The effects are undeniable: fish stocks are declining, water quality is deteriorating and habitats that once flourished are being destroyed. Let us not forget the impact on human health. The very water that sustains our local communities is now under threat, risking the health and well-being of future generations. If we do not act together now, the consequences could be catastrophic for our environment, our economy and our heritage.

I recently met Waterways Ireland in its headquarters in Enniskillen. I was heartened by the ongoing work that it is doing to protect our waterways. During the meeting, I raised the issue of blue-green algae, and, whilst much of it is unfortunately due to climate change, a couple of steps to address the pollution were outlined. The first is that we must invest in sustainable agriculture practices. Farmers, who have long been stewards of the land, need our support. By incentivising eco-friendly farming techniques and providing access to new technologies, we can ensure that food production and environmental protection go hand in hand.

Secondly, we need stronger regulation and enforcement when it comes to waste management. That means tackling illegal dumping and ensuring that waste water treatment facilities are upgraded to meet environmental standards. I have been raising this issue since getting elected. We need funding to ensure that waste water treatment issues are addressed across the North. Years of underfunding by the British Government has impacted negatively on public services, and NI Water is no exception.

Finally, we must look to the future by embracing innovation. There are countless opportunities to invest in green technologies that will protect our water systems. The lough has been a symbol of life and beauty for centuries; let us make sure that it remains so for centuries to come.

**Lord Elliott:** I thank Mrs Erskine for proposing this topic for the Adjournment debate. We are concerned about pollution at any level. I do not think that Lough Erne has got to the stage that Lough Neagh is at, but there is always a danger of it progressing that way. Of course, in Lough Erne, we have a totally different type of lough, in that it has two sections: the upper lough, which is, unusually, in the southern part; and the lower lough, which is in the northern part — that is Irish logic for you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Lough Erne is in a unique setting, particularly given that the Ulster canal can bring you right out to the sea from the upper lough. The lough is a really good tourist attraction, so I do not want to be completely negative. Lough Erne is a great showcase for Northern Ireland. We do, however, need to curtail the pollution.

I recall going to school — a wee while ago — and reading in the local press about the pollution from the raw sewage that was being piped into Lough Erne. That was some years ago, and we have had problems with pollution since then. The lower lough is extremely deep, and so the pollution may not have as much of an impact as it does on the upper lough, which



is much shallower — at some times of the year, that part is so shallow that you can walk through it. One of the biggest pollutants has been zebra mussels. They came in and cleared the plankton and some of the other species in the lough, allowing the sunlight to get right to the bottom of the lough. That issue has caused huge difficulties not only in Lough Erne but, as I understand it, in Lough Neagh. That has had a major impact on the lough.

The hydroelectric plant at Ballyshannon resulted from a deal that was done between the Republic of Ireland Government and the Northern Ireland Government in the late 1940s or 1950. That deal allowed them to build a hydropower plant to generate electricity. That was a good idea at that time, which also helped to drain a lot of the areas around upper Lough Erne. However, it has had a huge impact on fish stock, particularly on fish such as salmon and eels that need to get up through the power station. I have visited the power station on a number of occasions, and, once you see it, you can understand how difficult it is for those fish — the salmon and the eels — to get through it. Mitigation measures have been put in place, but that is not the same as letting those fish go naturally up and through the system. I do not want to stop the hydroelectric plant in Ballyshannon, but I would ask that some other system be found that allows the fish to get back into Lough Erne naturally.

Before I finish, I will highlight the good parts of Lough Erne. We have a natural hinterland there, with a natural lough that brings lots of tourists into the area, so I want to talk it up. There are lots of leisure facilities, an abundance of hotels and catering facilities, as well as water sports. It is a really good place to be and a good place to have in our constituency.

I praise those who do a lot of good work to keep the lough natural and provide tourist facilities not only for people coming into Fermanagh but for local people. The lough is used widely by local people and is a huge benefit to local industries. While I appreciate that there are negatives around pollution, Lough Erne has a lot of positives as well.

## 5.00 pm

**Mr Gildernew:** I welcome the opportunity to take part in another debate on our shared constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I do not want to talk at length, but I agree with all that Members have said about how Lough Erne is a jewel in the crown and a very important part of the economy and the environment in our

constituency. It provides much of the area's drinking water, and all of the unique local biodiversity relies on it. We have a clear duty to preserve, protect and develop the lough in a way that preserves and protects our waters.

Clearly, NI Water has a central role to play here. The underinvestment over many years is catching up on us, and we need to consider urgently how we deal with all of those challenges. As other Members have mentioned, it is clear that the waterways are an entirely interconnected system and that a complex range of issues affect the quality of the water. Dealing with that will require a complex and focused solution.

Finally, I want to point to the fact that we are dealing with water in an all-Ireland context. Jemma mentioned her meeting with Waterways Ireland, and we need to deal with the issue across the island, because there is no point in taking the approach of dealing with it here when the problems remain there. We need to bring to bear a holistic approach in terms of geography and in terms of issues and solutions.

**Mr Blair:** I fully understand the Member's request for an Adjournment debate on the pressing pollution issue around Lough Erne. I too have brought up the critical issues of water pollution and the state of our waters across Northern Ireland numerous times in the Chamber and at the AERA Committee in this and the previous mandate.

Lough Erne is a vital part of this region's tourism and recreation product. It is also important to County Fermanagh's economy and is a valued part of DAERA's public angling estate and should be protected as such at all times. The decline in the quality of our waters could be and has been easily attributed to Executive collapse, past inaction and previous ministerial prioritisation, but I genuinely prefer to seek solutions rather than apportioning blame, and I think that the current AERA Minister strongly shares that view with me.

While Lough Erne may appear to be a local issue, it is a fact that the environmental threat that it faces is a grave concern that could be mirrored in any of our waterways across Northern Ireland and our coastal waters. In my constituency, I regularly receive reports of suspected pollution or threats of pollution in the Six Mile Water and other rivers that flow into Lough Neagh. Just two weeks ago, I had the opportunity to visit Lough Beg with the RSPB to witness the work that it is doing to preserve the natural environment there. There is much to learn from those best practice for nature

examples, and we all, across our constituencies, should embrace them.

I express my gratitude to the AERA Minister for his efforts to develop and deliver the Lough Neagh report and action plan. I am aware that work has commenced in line with the plan to engage communities and sectors, incentivise behavioural changes and enforce enhanced environmental protections. It is crucial that significant sustainable funding, of course, is provided in order to ensure the full implementation of those actions and that that beneficial work reaches other waters across Northern Ireland.

In a debate a short while ago, I emphasised the crucial need for Executive approval of the environmental improvement plan. We must keep that as an absolute priority in the context of water pollution. The plan is not just a document but a road map to a cleaner, healthier environment that we all must commit to. That earlier debate also showed me that there are those who are not as environmentally progressive or progressive generally as they sometimes lead us to believe. Be under no illusion: that real environmental protection and improvement will be the test for us all. We must not underestimate the importance of preserving the ecosystem and the living environments that have been referred to today. Their survival is essential for the health and well-being of countless species, including our own. Lough Erne, the subject of the Adjournment debate, is a fantastic example of such an ecosystem. I genuinely commend the Member for bringing the topic to the House.

**Mr McMurray:** I thank Mrs Erskine for securing the Adjournment debate. It is an important issue, which is affecting Lough Erne and many other waterbodies around Northern Ireland. I welcome the debate and associate myself with some of the comments made by Members about the seriousness of the pollution affecting our freshwater bodies and marine waters. As an outdoor instructor in a previous life, I carried the issue of water quality close to my heart. I have spent many a happy hour enjoying myself on our beautiful rivers and lakes and along our coastline, but, sadly, those places are now becoming increasingly off limits to the public on account of public health concerns.

In preparation for my speech in the Adjournment debate, I consulted individuals involved in outdoor recreation in the Lough Erne area. I wish to speak on behalf of that community. While the local outdoor community is well aware of the issues, it wants to work with agencies to monitor and remedy the situation. I

know the amount of recreational and commercial reliance that there is on Lough Erne. It is a most beautiful and scenic part of the world. We must ensure that its ecological and environmental needs are maintained to the utmost standards, not just for our gratification but for the wildlife whose habitat is Lough Erne.

The issue of water quality affects many areas across Northern Ireland. I hear about it in my constituency work in South Down. Recently, we heard about the water pollution that is affecting bathing waters in Newcastle and other parts of Northern Ireland. The same week, part of the Mourne Sprint Triathlon had to be cancelled after blue-green algae were found in Castlewellan lake. It is a serious issue that is affecting our environment, our economy and the everyday lives of all of us who live in Northern Ireland. We cannot be complacent. We need to do everything in our power to turn the situation around.

Large bodies of water such as Lough Erne do not exist in isolation. They are fed by a network of streams and rivers. While algal blooms, on occasion, will happen in natural circumstances, their increasing frequency and intensity and the length of the blooms can be linked to our influence on the streams and rivers. It is, in part, about our creaking waste water system, which cannot cope with demand and ends up spurting untreated sewage into our waterbodies. Recently, we learned that, in 2023, Northern Ireland Water monitored 80 pipes that, taken together, discharged into coastal bathing waters for more hours than there are in a year. There are over 2,400 storm overflows across Northern Ireland, most of them unmonitored. The situation is therefore likely worse. I think that Mrs Erskine and I were comparing notes. Sewage discharge is also a major cause of the pollution that we now see in Lough Erne. Indeed, I heard reports of 250,000 tons of raw sewage being discharged into the lough. It is clear that our infrastructure cannot cope with the demands placed on it. We urgently need a long-term funding model for Northern Ireland Water.

Industry also has a big role to play. Simply put, too many nutrients are being washed into our waterbodies, creating prime conditions for algae to thrive. That looming crisis has been known about for decades if not centuries. Algal blooms were recorded in Lough Neagh as far back as 1910. Blue-green algae became a significant problem there and in other Northern Irish lakes in the 1960s. The Government of the time funded investigations of the causes and possible solutions, yet here we are again.

I welcome DAERA's recent change of direction towards sustainable farming. I know that water pollution is a priority for the Minister. I welcome his ambition to tackle the problem. It was good to see an ambitious programme of actions laid out in the Lough Neagh action plan earlier this year. Many of those actions will benefit waterbodies across Northern Ireland. It has also been good to see the Minister accept the findings of the recent report by the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) and his willingness to tackle the issues raised in it. The Executive will need to support the Minister in his important work. That support must include adequate funding to enable DAERA to incentivise changes in the agriculture sector and to facilitate effective regulation, testing and reporting.

The issue is not solely down to one polluter, one agency, one Department or, indeed, one quick action to sort out. It has developed over time from different sources and will require time to recover. Achieving that will require Departments to work together for the benefit of Lough Erne and other waterbodies across Northern Ireland.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Minister, you have up to 10 minutes.

**Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice):** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank Mrs Erskine, who tabled the Adjournment topic, and all those who participated in the debate.

Unfortunately, due to an inescapable diary clash, my colleague Minister Muir is not available to respond today, so I undertook to do so on his behalf. It may seem slightly strange, but I have a genuine interest in water quality from a previous life; a bit like what Andrew has just described.

The difficulties that are being experienced through blue-green algal blooms demonstrate to all of us how powerful our reliance on and connection to the aquatic environment are. Likewise, improvements in water quality will require all of us to limit the pressures that we place on that environment. Last Thursday, Minister Muir visited Lough Erne to see the impacts of blue-green algae. He also took the opportunity to meet Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, and he agreed to work more closely with it on the matter of tackling blue-green algal blooms.

Over the past five years, there have been 387 confirmed pollution incidents in the Lough Erne system. Of those, the principal cause of

pollution is attributed to agriculture, at around 44% of those incidents, followed by industry at around 16% and then Northern Ireland Water at around 12%. Sources from agriculture have also attributed around 63% of all medium- and high-severity incidents reported in the Lough Erne catchment. Since 2019, there have been 21 confirmed pollution reports associated with Northern Ireland Water assets in the Enniskillen area. All those incidents have been described as low severity. We also know that excess nutrients in the environment cause pollution in our waterways and that the main contributing sources are agriculture and, to a lesser but still significant extent, waste water from treatment works and septic tanks. A scientific report from October 2020, 'Phosphorous Stock and Flows in the Northern Ireland Flood System', which is on the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute website, attributes high nutrient phosphorous levels in Northern Ireland's water bodies to three main sources: around 62% comes from agriculture, 24% from waste water treatment works and 12% from septic tanks. You can see that the breakdown has remained fairly static.

We need to do more to reduce the overall phosphorous surplus in the Northern Ireland agriculture system. A review of the nutrient action programme that is under way is also considering associated recommendations from the Lough Neagh action plan. It is envisaged that the outcome of the review will be published in November, along with a consultation on the proposed action programme for the next four years and the strategic environmental assessment report. It is envisaged that all measures in the current action programme will be retained for the next programme. It is also clear from water quality data and scientific evidence that additional measures will be needed. Although the nutrient action plan is long established, we need to ensure that there is full implementation at farm level and improved compliance. It is important that people engage in that, as it is a key tool to deal with water quality issues right across Northern Ireland, including in Lough Erne, and to ensure that the learning that the Department is able to glean from Lough Neagh can then be applied across other bodies of water.

Minister Muir is also aware of the concerns about Northern Ireland Water and the arrangements in place that are known as SORPI — the statement of regulatory principles and intent — between the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Northern Ireland Water. Mrs Erskine raised the issue in her contribution. SORPI is under review because the arrangement is not fit for purpose. Minister Muir plans to engage with the Minister for

Infrastructure on the issue, and he has already been engaging with his own officials in that regard. He is on record as stating that the situation in which Northern Ireland Water gets, essentially, a bye ball for the pollution of waterways needs to end. Pollution, irrespective of the source, should follow the "polluter pays principle". There needs to be fairness. That speaks very much to what Mrs Erskine said about not demonising any particular sector.

We need to acknowledge that we have a water quality problem, but we also need to fund interventions to fix those issues; otherwise, the problems with blue-green algae will continue. Minister Muir has recognised that Northern Ireland's waste water infrastructure has suffered from long-term underfunding and that significant infrastructural improvements are required to meet current and future environmental standards. As I said, although I am acting on behalf of Minister Muir, I understand the challenges in that space. Part of my work for a very long time as an engineer was about looking at the operation of combined sewer overflows. With rainfall patterns changing — rainfall is changing in duration and intensity — storms that were statistically one-in-100-year events now happen multiple times in one year. Whilst the sewage released in the overflows is dilute by design, it nevertheless will build up the nutrient level in the water, if it happens repeatedly. That is a significant issue.

### 5.15 pm

Replacing that infrastructure, however, requires consistent and sustained investment in our water network. We look at how that is funded in the price control period. The waste water reform programme is funded in full for the remainder of the price control period from 2021 to 2027 — PC21, and into the next price control period from 2027 to 2033. If we do not have sustained investment, we will not be able to cope with the changes that are required in our network, and, critically, we will not be able to develop key areas in a safe and environmentally sustainable way.

The Department has also launched phase 1 of its blue-green algae small business research initiative (SBRI), which is being driven and developed to explore potential solutions to treat and reduce blue-green algae blooms without impacting the natural environment of Lough Neagh and associated Northern Ireland waterways. The outcome of that initiative will inform mitigation measures that may be transferable to other water bodies across Northern Ireland such as Lough Erne. More fundamental research that complements the

SBRI is being commissioned by DAERA from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, including a project that focuses on in-lake nutrient recovery management options, which is a really important step forward.

The main actions from the Lough Neagh action plan also promote a framework that focuses on four key pillars, which could apply equally to Lough Erne. The first is education, which involves empowering people with knowledge and skills and encouraging best practice. The second is investment, incentivisation and innovation aimed at motivating people and through funding actions that will drive the adoption of behavioural change. The third is regulation. The statutory obligation to protect the quality of our water has to be enforced at a statutory level. The final pillar — enforcement — is important. We have to take strong, meaningful action when compliance with the regulations fails.

That sequencing reflects the importance of early intervention. We have to start by trying to avoid pollution incidents in the first place and mitigating the impact. Where we do not find that change happening, it is important that we have an enforcement process that is fit for purpose and fair in its approach. It is clear that the Department and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency will not hesitate to take enforcement action, and it is important that a robust, fair, proportionate and targeted enforcement regime is there to act as a deterrent and to champion the "polluter pays principle". I know that Minister Muir is committed to delivering that. He is working with my officials in the Department of Justice to ensure that it is indeed proportionate.

Since Minister Muir's appointment, he has been clear that significant action also needs to be taken to address poor water quality in Northern Ireland generally. The difficulties experienced through blue-green algal blooms demonstrate our reliance on and connection with the aquatic environment. Improvements in water quality will require us all to limit the pressures that we place on that environment. They will also help us combat the risks of pollution and future harmful algae blooms. Everyone can play their part in achieving that. DAERA will continue to support and collaborate with all stakeholders and initiatives to reduce nutrient impacts on the water environment, be that in Lough Neagh, Lough Erne or any of our rivers and coastal waters.

Leonardo Da Vinci said:

*"Water is the driving force of all nature."*

Water is not only essential for all living things to survive; access to water, its quality and its management are essential elements of ensuring that people, communities and our economy can thrive. Our rivers, loughs and coastal waterways are vital for drinking, work, sport, recreation and tourism. They need to be carefully and sensitively managed and protected. My colleague is committed to that, and I hope that Members are reassured by the response today.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Thank you, Minister. I thank Deborah for securing the Adjournment debate.

*Adjourned at 5.19 pm.*